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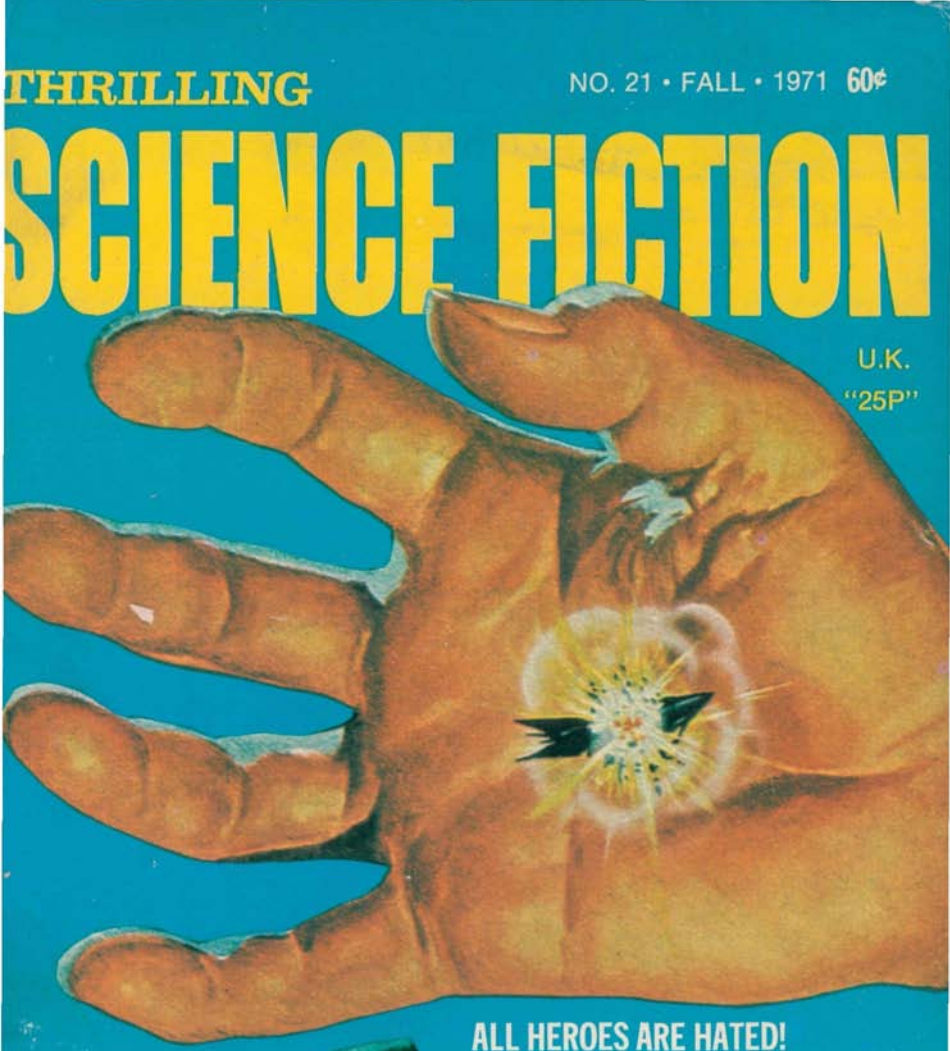

ALL HEROES ARE HATED!
by Milton Lesser

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THOUSAND-LEGGED AGENT
by Noel Loomis

THE INKEEPER OF MARS
by Dex R. Moore

VAMPIRE OF THE DEEP
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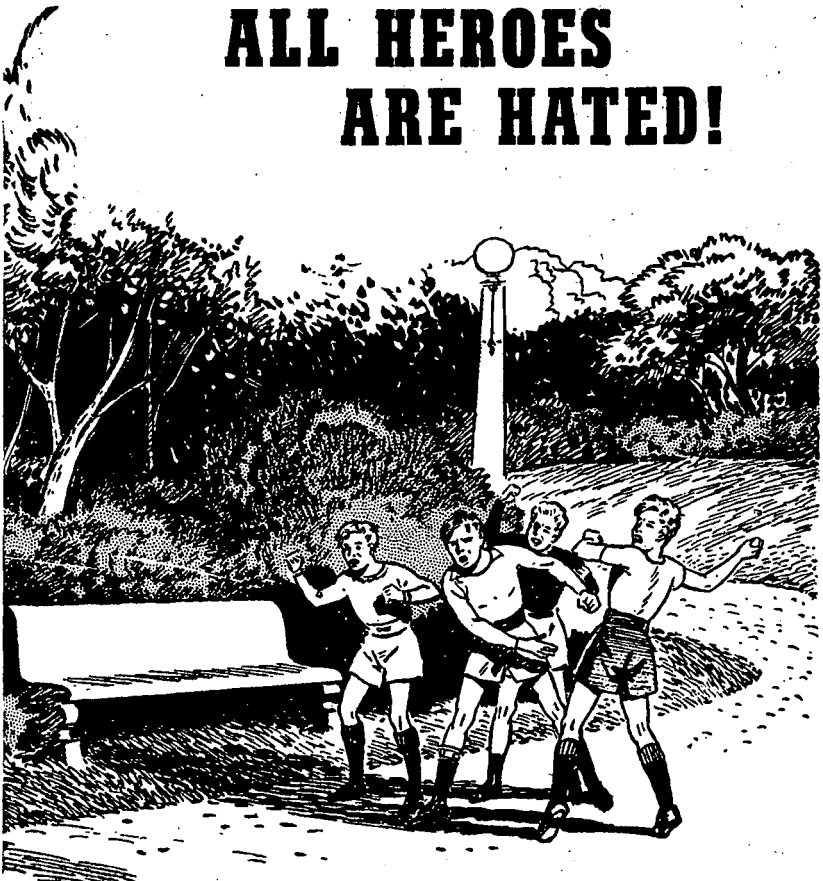
ALL HEROES ARE HATED!



By Milton Lesser

Earth had a strange way of rewarding its heroes: put a brand on their heads and hunt them down like a pack of mangy dogs!

KENTON knew all along that he should not have come to the city. Morning was coming and the people would see him.

It was an old city, not one of those built by the returned starmen, and its people would hate him.

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Kenton entered the square but still he saw no one. For a long while he stood at the base of the great bronze statue of the man who had first broken through into space, so many hundreds of years ago. The pre-dawn dusk still hung low over the city and he could not see the face of the statue, but he had seen such statues before and he knew the man's eyes were wide and he was looking up at the sky. It was the pose of a supplicant, a pose Kenton had assumed many times himself. It was meaningless: there was the Sanction and the stars could never be anything more than a speckled backdrop for Kenton's dreams.

Then Kenton saw the sign. It was fastened about one of the massive legs of the figure atop the pedestal, too high for Kenton to reach. It said:

THIS STATUE IS CONDEMNED
DEMOLITION DATE,
AUGUST 7, 2914

August 7th—that was today.

Something inside Kenton went numb. There was nothing in the city for him, nothing to call him back there in the face of all the hatred, except the statue. And now they had marked it for destruction. It was a tribute to the first of the starmen, and they would destroy it. He wondered if they intended to destroy the hundreds of silent ships waiting in the starfield for a day which would never come. This hatred could be a two-way proposition, for suddenly Kenton found himself hating the men of the city.

KENTON looked up uneasily. All at once he knew he was not alone. He did not know where the little man had come from or when he had entered the square, but now he was standing there, his bald head hardly coming to Kenton's shoulders.

"You are a starman?" The little man's voice was not unpleasant, but there was something vaguely familiar about his accent.

Kenton scowled, and his voice was bitter. "You're not guessing, are you?"

"Why, no. No, I'm not. I see the letter S on your forehead, and so I know you are a starman."

Kenton put a hand up to his forehead. The worst part of it was that he could not even feel the brand. But it was there—a big black letter *S*. *S* for Starman. *S* like a motionless black snake from his hairline to the bridge of his nose. *S* so that everyone would know to hate him because he was a starman.

"Okay, I'm a starman. Now run along before you get hurt. Starmen hurt people, you know. They go around hurting people all the time. That's how they stay alive. So go away, old man, before you get hurt."

The little man shrugged. "I'm new here. There's a lot that I don't understand yet. But I'm not afraid of you just because you wear an *S* on your forehead. I'd like to help you..."

It had been a long time since anyone had said that, or anything like it, to Kenton. He looked hard at the strange little man. If there had been anyone who wanted to befriend him—wanted to help a starman—it would turn out to be a little man with glasses, a bald head, and a pleasant smile. A harmless, ineffectual creature.

"They're going to take down the statue," Kenton said. "They're going to take it down because they want to forget. It's been only ten years and they haven't forgotten yet: so they're going to take down the statue."

"He was one of you? He was a starman?"

Kenton nodded. "He was the first starman."

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"And you are one of the last. It's pathetic in a way. Earth has been ruled out of space, and now the starmen have come back—"

Kenton often thought of this in self-pity, but he had never heard anyone but a starman say it before. Yet this little old man could not be one of them; he was not branded with the black *S*.

"Who are you?" Kenton demanded.

"Does it matter? I have said I am a stranger in the city, and I am. Consider me as a tourist if you'd like. That's what I am, a tourist."

"Then you must be rich—only the rich travel today. And when the starmen brought the colonists back ten years ago, that doubled earth's population. Few people are rich. If you were rich you would not wear that shabby clothing. You are no tourist."

"Logical, my boy. That is very logical. You have a good mind. Your argument is valid, it is valid all the way through. But you are wrong, because validity and truth can be two very different things. I am a tourist."

"STARMAN! Hey, look—the black *S*. He's a starman." It was a child's voice, the voice of a twelve-year-old boy, perhaps. It was the only sound except for the sweep of the wind across the starfield just north of the city on the hill. Kenton saw the kid come running into the square from one of the side streets, and then he saw him turn and call back over his shoulder.

"A starman, gang! Let's get him."

Kenton was not surprised to see the dozen kids out this early in the morning. Often they would sneak away from their homes before the sun came up and go out to the eerie starfield and play among the silent hulks of the starships. Kenton could remember his own youth, but it had been different: then he would creep out of bed in the darkest part of night which comes just before dawn and he would run with his friends down to the base of the hill, and there they would watch the great liners taking off for Sirius or Altair or Fomalhaut.

But now the liners lay awkwardly about the field, like huge silver insects that wanted to fly but were wingless, and the wind swept down among them, scaring the kids who came to play every morning...

Kenton heard the stone clatter against the pedestal of the statue and he jumped back and crouched at its base. This was not the first time he had been stoned by children. With the little man he stood in the center of the square, and although now they were crouched behind the pedestal and out of range for the moment, some of the kids could circle around and pelt them from the rear.

The little man seemed unperturbed. "Why are they throwing stones at us?"

"Not at you, old man, not at you. You just happen to be here, but they're throwing stones at me. I'm a starman. I've got an *S* on my forehead."

"But *why* are they throwing stones?"

Kenton mumbled an answer under his breath. He was sorry the little man was with him, but now he could do nothing about it. The rapid tattoo of the stones set up quite a clatter, and he saw some of the kids circling the pedestal.

A stone struck his elbow, numbing his whole arm. He gripped the little man's shoulder. "I'm going to make a run for it," he said. "They're throwing at me, not you—and I'm going to make a run for it. They won't hurt you after that."

The little man put up a hand in protest, and he opened his mouth to say something, but Kenton put his big palm against the man's chest and shoved him back down against the

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base of the pedestal. Then Kenton stood up and ran.

SOME OF the kids were frightened, and they turned and bolted for the side streets. But one of them was braver; he came close enough to stick out his leg and trip Kenton. Then he whooped triumphantly and called to his companions.

Kenton sprawled there on the pavement, and he saw the kids coming back. He started to get up, but he didn't have to. Someone yanked him to his feet.

The commotion had attracted some adults, and, in dressing gowns or pajamas, they had come running into the square. A big, blunt-faced man was holding Kenton by his numb arm and shaking a hairy fist in his face.

"We don't want you here. We don't want you, starman. What are you doing in this city?"

"He's scaring the kids. Damn him, he's scaring our kids."

"Yeah. He thinks he's hot stuff. A big guy, and he's tough with the kids. We oughta teach him a lesson."

"Why the hell don't you stay in the hills where you belong, starman? Why don't you stay in the hills and leave our kids alone?" This was a woman, and she came close enough to slap Kenton's face. She swung with her full arm and the heel of her palm struck Kenton's jaw. He was still dazed from his fall, and he reeled with the blow, but the blunt-faced man held him up so the woman could hit him again.

She pulled her arm back and this time her fist was clenched. Someone caught her arm before she could strike, and Kenton saw it was the little old man.

"That's enough," he said. "That's quite enough. Stop hitting him."

"Just who do you think you are?" demanded the blunt-faced man. "He's scaring our kids and we're going to teach him a lesson."

"Well, I don't think you ought to hit him. I was here and I saw the children start throwing stones at him. He didn't do anything."

"He didn't do anything! Will you listen to that! He didn't do anything. He's a starman, and because of what he done ten years ago, our kids gotta go hungry. Because of what he done, earth's got six billion mouths to feed. Because of what he done, we can't ever go back to the stars and get rich again. He didn't do anything—haw, haw."

"I'm new here," explained the little old man, "and I don't know everything that is going on—"

The woman who had struck Kenton frowned. "Well, friend, if you're new here, you better mind your own business. Even if I can't see how you don't know about all this, you better mind your own business. These hicks..."

She pulled her arm out of the old man's grasp and turned again to Kenton. By now a dozen people had struck him, and she leered at his bloody face. Kenton tore himself away from the blunt-faced man and ran through the crowd. On its edge, someone else struck him and he tottered and almost fell, but he knew that if he did fall he would not get up until they were through with him.

THEN HE was through the crowd, still running. Someone grabbed at his jacket and pulled it off his back, and then he had ducked up a side street. Doors were opening now and people were shouting and he could hear the angry muttering of the crowd behind him.

Presently he reached an intersection, where a solitary ground car had paused at a traffic signal. He yanked the door open, and the fat driver grunted, "Hey, what the hell do you want?"

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Kenton pulled the man toward him. He hit him once and hit hard and the man's eyes rolled wide and then closed. Kenton pulled him all the way out and let him slump to the pavement. Then he was in the car, studying the controls. The crowd was pounding up to the intersection now, and Kenton hadn't been in a car for ten years. A hand reached at the door and pawed within; then, with a whir, Kenton started the vehicle and left the crowd milling angrily at the intersection.

CHAPTER II

THE OTHER EXILE

KENTON stood on the edge of the starfield, looking out upon the great silent ships. He should have kept right on going to the hills, he knew, because some of the city dwellers might be following him. Instead, he had circled around the long dimension of the starfield and parked the car on the other side, five miles from the city.

The wind came in fierce blasts, ripping into Kenton's raw face. It moaned fitfully against the hulls of the silent ships—against the *Arcturus*, only earth ship to reach the Magellanic Clouds; the *Centauri*, first earth ship to leave the solar system and return; the *Deneb*, of which Kenton had been the master pilot...

He could remember that day, so many years ago, when he had come straight from Spaceman's School on Luna to the *Deneb*, when he had been twenty-one and everyone had said "Yes, sir, Mr. Kenton," and "No, sir, Mr. Kenton," and when he had taken the great silver ship out for the first time. That was fifteen years ago; now the ship lay on its silver belly among a thousand others as the wind whistled by.

Kenton was not aware that he had been walking until he covered half the distance between the edge of the field and the huge bulk of the *Deneb*. The ship was just in front of him, and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He had been the master pilot, not the captain, but the *Deneb* was *his* ship. He followed its flowing lines with his eyes now: built long and slender not for speed, for it met no resistance in the inter-stellar void, but for beauty. He could remember that first day going up the ramp in his shiny new uniform and all the smart salutes of the minor offices. Now those officers—if they lived—were starmen with big black *S*'s branded on their foreheads, members of the fraternity of hate.

The ramp was there, the same ramp, and Kenton's feet carried him up it again. He wore no jacket, his shirt was torn and his face was cut and bruised, but he walked proudly up the same ramp and reached the *Deneb's* port. He stood there a long while and let the wind buffet him. Then he turned his back on the wind and pushed against the port. Rusty machinery ground in protest, and then Kenton almost fell back off the ramp.

The port had slid open.

His slow measured step was almost reverent as he entered the ship and he could feel his heart pounding hard under the torn shirt. Only a little light came in through the port, and he followed one wall of the companionway with his hand. He headed forward for the engine room, where, if some accident had also left that door open, he might caress the controls and firing studs of the great starship he had once piloted.

The sound his shoes made on the metal floor of the companionway was abnormally loud, and his hands trembled when he reached the door. He stood there for a moment, praying it would open to his touch, and then he

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gave it a sudden push.

The door stood ajar and the light from the sun, streaming in through the fore-port, blinded him. Then something hurtled against him and he was born to the floor back out in the dark companionway, and he struggled with an unknown assailant.

Tears of rage welled in Kenton's eyes. "Damn you," he muttered. "Damn you!"

IN THE DARKNESS he could not see his attacker, but he fought. The ordeal of the morning had left him weak, and for a while he lay there, the fists pummelling his face and body. Someone sat astride Kenton and was hitting him, but he realized the blows were not hard ones. He pushed up and over and he heard a whimper, and then he was on top, reaching for his assailant's throat.

His hands found the throat and his fingers closed down on it. He leaned forward, exerting pressure, and th , abruptly, he stopped. The faint scent of perfume reached his nostrils—he had not smelled perfume in ten years, but he could not mistake it. As he relaxed his grip, the whimpering came again, and Kenton knew this was no man he fought. He had almost killed a woman.

Stiffly, he stood up and backed away, watching the dim shape rise there in the darkness.

"Okay," the girl panted. "You're big and you're strong and you can beat up a woman. Now I'll go back. "I'll go back to George Bancroft. Now are you satisfied? He must be paying you plenty for this."

Kenton said, "I'm not taking you back anywhere because I don't know where you're supposed to go. I never even heard of George Bancroft. So keep your shirt on."

"Well, if George didn't send you, why did you follow me here? No one but kids come out among these ships anymore, and all the ships except this one are locked. So why did you follow me?"

"I didn't follow you. I came here because I once piloted the *Deneb*, and I wanted to see it again—"

Kenton was sorry as soon as he had spoken. Now the girl would know he was a starman.

"You piloted the *Deneb?*".

Kenton muttered "yes" under his breath.

"Then you're a starman!" Kenton found himself liking the sound of her voice. He was used to the coarse women at the starmen camps in the hills, and this girl sounded different. "A starman—and I know you. You're Keith Kenton."

"Yes, I'm Kenton..." His voice trailed off. How had she known? No one hob-nobbed with the starmen; no one came near them except in hatred. Yet she knew his name.

"Hah!" she said. "You're surprised that I know you. Don't be, Kenton. I've studied history; I know my starmen. Keith Kenton, Master Pilot, Starship *Deneb*, born 2878, graduated Luna 2899, five years a pilot, then came back to earth with the Sanction in 2904. Keith Kenton."

"You have an advantage. I don't even know your name."

The girl laughed again, and suddenly Kenton did not care if he got into the engine room or not. He wanted to go outside with this girl and see her there on the ramp with the wind blowing in her hair. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew she'd be lovely.

He reached for her hand and she drew away from him. "Careful, Kenton. You're right, you don't know me. Please don't start getting impetuous. I've had enough of impetuous men."

Now Kenton laughed, and he had not heard the sound of his own laughter in a long time. "Nothing like that. I'm too tired. I just wanted to take

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your hand so we could walk down the companionway together and go outside where I can see you."

He was conscious of the silence, and then he heard the girl's voice again. "All right, Kenton."

The girl's hand took his in the darkness. He liked the feel of it.

THEY STOOD at the foot of the ramp and Kenton looked at the girl. He looked a long time and she said, "Stop it, I'll blush."

Her skin was very white and she had the greenest eyes in the world. The wind swept her dark hair around her face and where the sun touched it, the highlights were red. Kenton's gaze moved down. She wore a tunic of pale green, custom-tailored and glove-perfect in its fit. Her legs were long and straight, very white where the skirt ended at mid-thigh. Kenton realized he had not yet let go of her hand.

For her part, the girl stared at Kenton. Mostly her eyes remained rooted to the black *S* on his forehead.

"You know," she said, "I've never seen a starman before."

"It isn't odd," Kenton admitted. "It's not odd at all." Then he asked a question: "Are you a colonist or a terran?"

"Oh, I'm terran. If I were a colonist, I'd have returned to earth in '04, and I'd have seen my starman then. No, I'm a terran, but sometimes I look at the stars and I wish—"

She stopped, and Kenton just looked at her. Then she said: "I wish there was no Sanction. I wish I was—"

This time she turned away, and she said, "You'll only make fun of me, Kenton."

"I won't make fun of you."

"I wish I were out there among the stars. I don't like the earth, Kenton. I don't like it at all. There's not much I can do about it, and I've never been anywhere else and so I can't be sure, but I think I would like it better. You've been . . . everywhere, Kenton."

He smiled. "You would like it better. You'd like it much better. The earth is a tired planet—a luxury planet once, a pleasure planet. But now it's a hard place to live. The population is doubled, and half the people are unemployed. Then there are us starmen . . ."

"Why do they hate you so, Kenton? Oh, I know the reason, but why is there so *much* hatred?" She put her hand on the black *S*, ran her fingers soothingly over his forehead.

Kenton smiled slightly. This was the second time today someone had shown sympathy. First the little old man there in the square, and now this girl. Ordinarily, Kenton was not talkative. But now he wanted to, because he knew the girl would listen.

THEY WALKED in silence for a while, past the *Arcturus* and past the *Centauri*. She looked up at him—again her eyes strayed to the *S* and stayed there, and he saw pity in them. "Why, Kenton? I've asked you a question. Tell me why."

Kenton's answer was another question. "What's your name?"

"Why don't we leave it this way? I'll walk with you until it gets dark. I'll walk with you long into the night if you want. But don't ask me who I am. I'll walk with you and be your friend, Kenton, but don't ask me my name."

"Why not?"

"Just don't, that's all."

Kenton said lightly. "Okay, okay. I won't. But don't you go around asking me questions."

"Please, Kenton, you're being unfair. You don't know *why* I can't tell you my name, but it's not just a whim. I can't tell you because I don't

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want you to know who you've been with."

"I never would have known it." Kenton could feel himself getting bitter again, and he tried to tell himself how unimportant her name really was, but he knew he wanted her to tell him.

She smiled, but now she let go of his hand. "You're pushing me, Kenton, and I don't want to be pushed. Look: maybe I'm trying to get away from someone, and maybe, if you should be asked, I don't want you to be able to say you saw me. Maybe I'm running away, too."

Kenton looked again at her clothing. It was a delicate fabric, an expensive fabric. Even this soon after the Sanction there were few rich people left on earth, but he knew this girl was rich.

"They hate you enough to beat you, Kenton. That's what happened to your face, isn't it? Your face doesn't look so good, Kenton."

"What's the difference? Very few people look at it. We starmen aren't exactly social lions."

"I was fifteen when the Sanction came, Kenton. That was ten years ago. I read the papers and listened to the reports. But I was a kid, and didn't really understand. And now everyone hates you starmen, but I don't hate you. You did something wrong. Maybe you did something terribly wrong—ten years ago. All of you didn't do it, though."

Kenton said, "It was done, all right, and now earth has six billion people. Not three billion, spread out al over the planet and living off the luxuries of the star-trade. But six billion, and that's a lot of people. Six billion, with not enough jobs for half of them.

"Maybe the colonists hate us even worse than you terrans do. Earth is not for the colonists, but they were forced to return. Now they're out of place, and most of them are out of work."

"I was almost a colonist, Kenton. I remember, just before the Sanction, we were going to the Vegan system. I had an uncle there, and he was getting Dad a job, a good job. But the Sanction came and now my uncle's back on earth. He's been unemployed for ten years, and once he found a starman getting food from our cook. He killed the man. He killed him and a lot of people saw it, yet no one did anything. They shouldn't be able to go around killing—"

"The old laws don't apply. Oh, they apply to terrans and they apply to colonists, but they don't apply to starmen. There are only a couple of hundred thousand of us, and the old laws don't apply. If the people had their way, we'd all be killed. But they don't, because it's just possible that one day the Sanction will be lifted, and then the starmen will be needed to take earth's millions back into space again.

"Instead we wear the black *S*, so everyone will know we are starmen, and we can't get jobs anywhere. Then the people say, 'See the shittless starmen.' And a lot of us become outlaws..."

"Were you ever an outlaw?" she asked.

"I have to eat. I haven't had much to do with the bands in the hills, but I have to eat."

THE GIRL turned around and faced him, and Kenton was lost for a moment in the depths of her eyes. Above them, the sun was low on the horizon now, and the cold winds had begun to blow again over the starfield, moaning past the silent hulks of the starships. They were in the middle of the starfield, and it stretched from one horizon to the other, except where Kenton could see

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the city on the hill way off in the distance. It stretched out in all directions, barren and brooding, more a graveyard than any cemetery Kenton ever had seen.

Slim fingers dug into Kenton's shoulder, and the girl's face was close to his. "What really happened?" she said. "What happened out in the Fomalhaut System ten years ago? Tell me, Keith." It was the first time she had used his given name.

Kenton frowned. She was a wealthy girl with wealthy friends, and maybe she just wanted him to tell her so she could tell all her friends about the day she had spent with a starman. Once on the *Deneb* a girl had spent the whole voyage with him, laughing and drinking and dancing. But she met her fiance in the Centauri System, and as they walked away Kenton had heard her speaking of all she had learned from the Master Pilot. Now, again, it was a girl on the *Deneb*, the silent hulk of the *Deneb*, only this time she had come off the ship with Kenton. There was no one else and she had come off the ramp all alone with Kenton.

"IT WAS the *Deneb*," Kenton said. "It was the *Deneb* out in the Fomalhaut System, and I was there."

"Keith—you saw it. The histories never say which ship was responsible; they only tell what happened, not how or why. You were there..."

"We had come through to Fomalhaut in record time, six days. Everyone celebrated. Six days was quick, all the way out to Fomalhaut, and we had a wild party to celebrate. Some of the men got drunk. We all got drunk, but some of us got too drunk.

"The Captain couldn't hold his liquor. He couldn't hold it at all, and he should have known. We were waiting for clearance out of hyper-space, but the Captain became impatient. He blasted out too soon and we were close to Fomalhaut, and someone forgot to lock the hyper-drive. We came through into space with both drives going.

"Do you know what the hyper-drive can do to a star? We couldn't shut it in time—the Captain had locked himself in the control room, and some of us knew because the stasis was still going, but we couldn't get in. Do you know what the hyper-drive can do?"

Kenton could feel the tears in his eyes, and the wind stung him. The girl said: "There are the histories, but they don't tell much—"

"It can knock hell out of a star. Fomalhaut is a big baby, but the hyper-drive is a pretty powerful thing—it can shoot you across the galaxy to the Magellanic Clouds in a few years. It took us to Fomalhaut in six days, record time. And we switched out of hyper-space too soon, without clearance, with the hyper-drive going full blast.

"We broiled Fomalhaut. In a few seconds, we turned it into a supernova. In a month it had used up the energy stored there for billions of years of future use. We high-tailed it back into hyper-space and we weren't touched. But Fomalhaut...

"Fomalhaut had six planets. Six planets and twelve billion inhabitants. They were a slow people, several hundred years behind earth in development. They had interplanetary travel, crude stuff, but they never got out of their own system. They roasted. Every one of them roasted. In a matter of days, the twelve billion inhabitants of the Fomalhaut System were dead, and we had killed them..."

Kenton was crying openly now. The tears were rolling down his cheeks, but no sound came out of him. They had sat down on one of

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the many ramps, and the girl drew his head down on her breast. "I'm sorry, Keith," she said. "I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have made you talk."

HE SMILED and straightened up. "No. No, it's good. I've got to get it out, and the way we live now, I can't. But *twelve billion* people! They weren't exactly human, but they were people—you get to feel that way when you're a starman. Twelve billion people, and we killed them. They never had a chance.

"The Interstellar Government met in special session. It hardly ever meets, you know—only in a real emergency. They met, and to a man, they voted earth out of space. We weren't ready, we were too young, and there was too much danger. It wasn't likely, but something like that *could* happen again. One chance in a million, maybe less—but they didn't want to take the responsibility, and earth was ruled out of space. Confined to the solar system, which is a laugh—because earth alone can harbor life here.

"So, after the Sanction, the starmen came back. We brought the colonists with us. They had no choice, either. They were exiled back to earth, every last one of them. And earth had lived on the luxury trade of the star-lanes. All the really big cities were gone, and earth couldn't support six billion people. It had to, it's doing it now, but in ten years the standard of living dropped five-hundred percent. The roof fell in, and it hasn't hit the ground yet."

The girl nodded. "So the starmen are to blame."

"Yes. And in a sense, they're right. The qualifications on Spaceman's School entrance should have been more rigid. I don't know. We're to blame, and we're branded, so everyone will know."

"And no one on earth—except your crew—has ever seen what happened to Fomalhaut."

"I hadn't thought of that. But you're right, of course. Fomalhaut is a lot more than ten light years away, and it still shines as if nothing has happened. Suddenly, years from now, it will flare up—"

"Maybe by then the people will forget."

"They'll never forget. No one can marry a starman. It's forbidden. Women are taken in the hills, of course, but the starmen are dying out. The people will forget in another fifty years, when there are no starmen left, but not before. Meanwhile, we can only die..."

"You could go into space! Unlawfully, you could go into space."

Kenton smiled ruefully. "No. There's the Sanction, and they have monitors. In the beginning, a few of the starmen tried, but they were blasted out of space. We're earthbound. The whole culture is earthbound, with nothing to do. It's as if the stars don't exist. And we're going backwards. Civilization is collapsing. It's hard to see in ten years, but with all this unemployment, all the discontent—earth is on the way down.

"I met a guy today. He was a tourist. I don't know where he was from, but he was a tourist. That's rare; there just aren't many tourists any more. There's no time, there's no money, and few people want to do that sort of thing. Once you've been to the stars you can't be content with one stinking little planet in a system of eight other worlds, all dead..."

THE SUN had set and now the stars were out. It was a clear night with no moon, and the great white arc of the Milky Way spanned

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the sky mockingly. The liners were huge dark shadows on the starfield, and off in the distance the lights of the city on the hill could not dim the stars. The wind didn't hurt Kenton's face anymore—he could feel the stiffness where blood had clotted.

The girl seemed perfectly content to walk with him and say nothing, and Kenton felt more at ease than he had in the past ten years. Once they looked up together, spontaneously, at the stars, and Kenton thought of the statue in the square. According to schedule, it had been destroyed today.

Suddenly they heard the distant whir of an automobile motor. The girl said:

"They're looking for me."

Kenton couldn't argue with that. He didn't know why the girl was out here on the starfield, but he did know that she was running away from something. And no one—except kids, who didn't drive ground cars—came out to the starfield anymore.

The sound grew louder, and presently Kenton saw a great fanning search-beam rove over the shapes of the deserted liners. Not more than a few hundred feet could be between them and the car now, and the girl huddled close to Kenton as the beam swept near them. They tried to duck down beneath one of the ramps, and for a moment Kenton thought they had made it. But the beam cut sharply back, probing the darkness under the ramp.

Soon the whir of the engine stopped altogether, and the silence which followed hurt Kenton's ears. He could feel the girl trembling beside him, and he put his arm across her shoulder, clumsily. Then he heard footsteps in the darkness under the ramp, just beyond where the beam could reach.

"Come on, get out of there," the voice said. It wasn't a loud voice, but it was loud enough, and Kenton recognized the ring of authority when he heard it.

"I know you're there, so come on, get out. Now."

They were under the ramp, and here the ramp was three feet off the ground. In the light of the beam from the car, Kenton saw the legs. There were four legs—two men—and they were close. Then one pair of legs bent at the knees, and a new light, a strong and blinding light, knifed in under the ramp.

The voice again: "Okay, I see you. Now, come out."

KENTON took his arm away from the girl's shoulders. This wasn't his fight, and maybe those two men had a gun. He crawled until he had gotten out from under the ramp, and then he stood up, the light shining in his face and blinding him. A sound from behind him indicated the girl was coming out, too.

The voice, this time close by, said, "Do you see that? Do you see what I see? I don't know who he is, but he's with her and he's wearing the black *S*. He's a starman. Now what would she be doing with one of them?"

The other voice was softer, and Kenton could tell that the man didn't want to say much. "You never can tell what Valerie will do. Here's Valerie, and there's nothing amazing about her being with a starman."

The girl said quietly, "Hello, George. Okay, you found me. But I don't want to go back with you."

The softer voice belonged to George. "You haven't much choice, Valerie. You'll come back with me."

Kenton said: "The lady said she doesn't want to go."

The deeper voice, the voice that wasn't George Bancroft's, answered: "Watch it, starman. This is none of your business, and it could get you killed. No one would care, you know."

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"I'd care," the girl told him. "Don't hurt him."

"Okay, okay." This was George, and he still held the light so Kenton could not see. "So you'll care. We won't hurt him. We'll let him go back to the hills where he belongs. But you're coming with me now, Valerie."

"There's only one thing you don't seem to understand."

"Yes? What's that?"

"I don't want to marry you, George. I don't want to marry you, now or ever. I'll go back to the city if you force me to, but I won't marry you. Do you understand that?"

In answer, a hand came into view and grabbed the girl's shoulder. She tried to pull away, but the hand was strong and her struggles were useless.

Kenton swung the side of his own hand down in a hard chopping blow against the man's wrist. The hand retreated into the darkness, and George's voice said:

"Take care of him. Take care of the starman."

Into the light came the big bulk of the other man, but Kenton hit him before he could get ready. Kenton hit him just once, but the man moaned and fell slowly out of the light.

Kenton heard an angry oath from George, and the beam of light did a crazy dance upwards and then came down fast, and Kenton realized George was trying to hit him with the torch. Kenton lunged down and away and the light swung past and he struck out blindly behind it and felt his knuckles brush against George's face. Then they were in close, slugging at each other, and this George could punch. It was so dark that Kenton could see nothing. The light fell and went out, and someone shut off the fanning beam in the car, probably the girl.

George began to falter. Kenton kept on punching, but he had to lower his blows or he would be striking at air. He felt the bulk of George's weight at his knees, and he had a wild temptation to kick out with his leg. Only it wasn't necessary. George Bancroft had had enough, and now he slumped all the way to the ground and lay still.

Kenton stood there, panting. Then the fanning light from the car went on again, and the engine started, drowning out the sound of the wind.

The car crawled over to Kenton and stopped. The girl was at the controls.

"Let's go," she said. "Get in."

CHAPTER III

THE HUNTED ONES

IT WAS a nice day, a warm spring day, and up on the other side of the hills the wind was not as strong. They had abandoned the ground car at the foot of the hills because it was not made to travel over rough terrain, and they had made their way up and over the hills on foot. Now they were hungry. Three days had passed; and while they could satisfy their thirst in the mountain streams, the berries and fruits they ate were not enough to satisfy their hunger.

When Kenton was still a boy, he would come to these hills, because from the very highest point you could look down on the starfield and see the tiny dots of ships as they took off. Now the ships didn't take off anymore, and Kenton and the girl had already passed that high point and kept going. Kenton wanted to put as much distance as possible between them and the city.

Here, on the third day, the girl noticed the extent of wilderness for the first time. "Kenton, there are no people. It's deserted. With six billion people on earth, how can that be?"

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He laughed shortly. "You forget that the starmen take to the hills, but they stay near enough to the cities so that they can raid for food and women. People give the starmen a wide range—no one wants any part of 'em unless they come down to the cities, and then there's trouble."

"So there are starmen in these hills?"

"Yes. Here, somewhere, there's a big camp of them, perhaps the biggest. Don't you worry your pretty little head, Valerie, they'll find us."

"What are you laughing about? They'll find us—and what will they do?"

"Don't worry. Don't forget, I'm a starman, too. They won't do a thing—and we'll get food."

"We'd better. I'm beginning to feel that there isn't an ounce of flesh on me."

"You don't look it. Besides, I didn't like the idea of you coming up here with me. But then you didn't want to marry the guy."

"What do you mean, me coming up here with you? Who got the car?" Valerie laughed musically, then sobered abruptly. "I didn't have any choice, Keith. George has everything my family wants, and they want me to marry him. I couldn't. We don't get along on anything. We disagree on the most basic things. He probably hates starmen more than anyone else in the city. I mean it, Keith, he probably does. And I—"

"What about you?"

"I don't hate starmen at all. I've only met one, and I don't hate them at all. Keith..."

He took her in his arms and kissed her. For a long while they stood together, close together and her lips were warm and soft and Kenton didn't want to stop kissing her, ever. She pushed him away, slowly, and she was smiling.

Her voice was tremulous: "Keith, I never have to go out of the hills. I could stay here with you and—"

"Sure, sure. How would we live? It's not for you, Valerie. It can never be for you."

He knew he also should have said that it couldn't be because he was a starman. But he didn't say that. Instead he turned and walked away. In the silence he heard the girl moving through the undergrowth behind him. He began to whistle. It was the first time he had whistled in years, he realized. It was a song that had been popular during one of his last flights on the *Deneb*.

WHEN Valerie heard the sounds she told Kenton they were being followed, but he shook his head. No one would come on foot looking for them in the hills. If George was looking for them, it would be in an aircraft.

Yet the sounds were there, for Kenton heard them too. They were not the only one crashing through the thick undergrowth. Kenton said: "The starmen have found us."

Valerie shuddered a little, and Kenton took her hand. "You'd think they'd be quiet about it," she said. "But they're clumping through the woods like a bunch of kids on a picnic. I'm scared, Keith."

"What have they got to be quiet about? No one comes up into these hills, unless he's a starman. Or unless he's running away from something. In the camps here you'll find a few men who don't wear the black S. They're here because they can't go back to the cities, and the starmen are glad to have any additions."

"I'm scared, Keith," she said again.

"Take it easy, Val. You've got nothing to be scared about. The starmen are hated, but they don't really hate in return. At least most of them

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don't. Actually, they're a little afraid, and they keep to themselves except when they venture down to the cities for supplies.

"For supplies? Who sells it to them?"

Kenton laughed. "No one sells them anything. They take what they want, and then they beat it back to the hills. It's only been ten years, but a lot of people in your cities have never seen a starman."

"Um, yes. I've heard mothers make their children behave by saying 'The starman will get you if you're bad.' Did you know that you were a bogeyman, Keith?"

Kenton was about to answer, but he heard a drone from far off. Immediately, the sounds in the woods about them ceased, and the droning became louder. Soon a speck appeared on the horizon back in the direction of the city. It grew larger, and presently Kenton could make out a gyro-plane, a solitary little flying ship approaching from the city.

"That's George," Valerie said.

Kenton grunted as he watched the craft grow. The droning became louder, and soon the ship was directly overhead, not more than two or three hundred feet above the wooded hills. It came so close that Kenton could see the license number on the gray bottom, then passed and droned on until it became a dot in the sky. Then it was gone.

"That's George," Valerie said again. "I know his license number."

"Well, he didn't find anything. He's out looking for you, but he didn't find anything. It won't be easy for him, here in the hills."

She said: "He's still looking."

AND THEN she was silent. The noises had started again in the woods, and soon Kenton could see the men coming through the undergrowth. There were perhaps a dozen of them, and all wore remnants of their uniforms, as did Kenton. They approached easily, confidently, not at all worried by the appearance of two strangers, and presently one of them said:

"Kenton? You're Keith Kenton, aren't you?"

Kenton had lived alone instead of with the bands of starmen in the hills, so he did not at first recognize the man. He was big and burly and his hair was very dark, with a dark tangle of beard covering his face. What was left of his uniform showed that he was a captain.

More than anything, it was the bushy black hair which told Kenton who the man was. Ten years slipped away, and Kenton almost found himself coming to attention smartly and saluting. "Captain Harkness," he said, and there was emotion in his voice.

Harkness had been captain of the *Deneb*. It was Harkness who, that terrible day in the Fomalhaut System, could not hold his liquor. Harkness...

"—wondering about you, Kenton," Harkness was saying. "Almost all the old crew of the *Deneb* is together here. Only you, and Denton, and Farley—"

"Farley is dead," Kenton said. "I saw him killed." He had been living in the hills with Farley in the beginning, but one day they had gone down to the city and Farley was killed. That was a long time ago, and until now he had almost forgotten the incident completely.

But the sight of these men made everything come back in a rush. Captain Harkness, Jenkins, O'Keef, Larkin, Finer—they were all there. The men of the *Deneb*. The proud officers of the *Deneb*, living now in the hills like savages. The cream of earth's culture—or they wouldn't have been

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starmen—reduced to this. He remembered the day Farley had been killed. They had gone down to the city to get some books: Farley couldn't go for long without Chaucer and Proust and Hemmingway and a lot of the other ancients, and he had been killed getting those books.

Now Jenkins and O'Keef and Larkin were thumping him on the back and smiling at him, and he stripped the beards away with his mind, and how easily the years went with them! There was Larkin pouring over his astrogation charts, flame-haired O'Keef, the exec, thundering his orders down to the 'low decks crew, shy little Jenkins showing some passengers through the communications room....

NOW THEY stood around him in old and filthy clothing, in torn clothing, with beards on their jowls and bangs on their foreheads to hide the black S. They all came and they pounded Kenton's back and shook his hand and they jabbered about him excitedly. All except Harkness—after the first happy greeting; Harkness hung back, and Kenton gestured to him now.

"What's the matter with him? He's your leader, isn't he?"

"Harkness?" Larkin snorted. "Harkness, our leader? Hell, no. No one pays much attention to Harkness now. He hardly ever talks. He said hello to you, and that's amazing. That's probably all you'll get out of him—"

"Oh, he *talks*." This was little Jenkins. "But better not pay too much attention to what he says. Our leader? Well, that's Brian here," and he pounded big O'Keef in the ribs.

O'Keef grinned affably. "Glad to have you back with us, Keith, boy. Even if you are a Scot." And then he was laughing, and it was the old humorous bone of contention between them, as it was ten years ago, and Kenton knew that the big smiling O'Keef had not changed much.

"Mister Kenton! Mister Kenton!" It was a voice Kenton remembered well, and again, he had the odd feeling that he should jump to attention.

Captain Harkness approached him. "We're set to blast off, Mister, so what are you standing around for? Get set, Mister, because we're ready to blast off for Fomalhaut." His face was very serious.

"Oh, Lord," Larkin said. "He's going to Fomalhaut again. It isn't so bad when he goes anyplace else, but when he goes to Fomalhaut he just keeps talking and talking—"

"You there, Larkin: got that orbit mapped?"

Larkin snapped to attention. "Yes, sir. All right now, sir. On the beam all the way." He nudged Kenton with his elbow, but Kenton knew that Larkin wasn't so tough. He was not humoring Harkness to be funny. He felt sorry for the man.

Harkness shouted his orders around in the voice that Kenton remembered so well, and presently O'Keef said:

"All right now, sir. We're underway. We can take it easy for a while."

Harkness smiled. "You think so, Mister O'Keef? You think it was a good blast-off?"

"It was perfect," O'Keef assured him.

VALERIE HAD stood on the edge of the little clearing, not saying a word, and it was the first time, Kenton realized, that his thoughts had been off her for more than a few moments since they had met.

"Hey, Val," he called, and smiling a bit shyly, she approached. Kenton introduced her around and she nodded to everyone and Kenton told them that this was his woman. He waited

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for Valerie to deny it—he almost expected her to do so, but then he knew that she'd understand this was the best way. By telling them she was his woman, no one would bother her.

They all nodded and they smiled and they shook Valerie's hand as if she were a man. All except Harkness. Harkness wanted to know what a woman was doing hob-nobbing with the crew.

Kenton was still talking about old times as they walked to the camp, talking with Jenkins and Larkin, O'Keef and Finer, talking of the days when they were the rollicking crew of the *Deneb*. The rollicking happy-go-lucky crew of the *Deneb*, the laughing crew of one of the biggest, proudest liners in the fleet. And now they wore beards, and they wore bangs because they didn't want to be reminded of the black *S* on each forehead, and the captain still gave his orders here on earth in the hills beyond the field where the *Deneb* waited silently, and no one listened to him....

CHAPTER IV

THE OFFER

THERE WERE some things about the camp in the hills which Kenton liked, and for a time at least he was sorry he had not spent those last ten years there. Actually, though, it was hard to tell. He was happier now than he had been in a decade, but he knew that Valerie, as much as anything, was responsible for that. Best of all he liked to sit high on a hill at night with the girl at his side and watch the great sweep of stars overhead and dream that one day he would be out there again, in all that splendor, and this time the girl would be with him.

Several times in those weeks which followed, Kenton heard the far-off drone of aircraft, but only twice did a ship actually come close enough for them to see it. The first time it was George again, and he swooped down low over the camp and Kenton could not tell if he had seen it or not. The shacks were of wood, roofs covered with branches and shrubbery, built about the big clearing haphazardly. From the air they should look like so many trees or clumps of trees, Kenton thought. And that, of course, was the idea. The starmen wanted it this way: they wanted the location of their camp a secret. Brian O'Keef had told Kenton about that the first day. The smile had gone from the eyes of the flame-topped giant as he told Kenton that you'd never know when the city-dwellers would take it upon themseves to comb the hills for the starmen.

The second airship was not George's. Even from a distance they could tell it was much too big, and when it came close Kenton saw that the license number was different. The ship hovered over the camp for a long time, its gyro-blades gleaming in the sun, then it dipped once and headed back toward the city. O'Keef didn't like that. He didn't like that at all. The unknown pilot, Kenton thought, had certainly seen the campsite for what it was.

After that, there were no more forays into the city. The starmen had enough of everything for a while: their provisions weren't luxurious, but Kenton had had much worse—he had lived on much worse for ten years, and he found it no hardship to remain in the clearing.

ONE DAY NOT long after the second airship had come and gone, Valerie, laughing mysteriously, led him to a hut a little larger than the rest.

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There a man met them at the doorway and, smiling, ushered them in. Then he stood back in the shadows of the interior and he waited, and presently Valerie spoke.

"Keith, do you want to continue to sleep on the floor forever? I sleep in the bed in our shack and you sleep on the floor, and sometimes I feel sorry for you."

"Well, thanks, Val—but I certainly wouldn't want to change places with you. You're a woman—"

"I'm glad you think so. I was wondering. So I'm a woman, Keith... and are you a man?"

"Now, what kind of a question is that?"

The gray-haired man stepped out of the shadows, and the black *S* on his forehead stood out sharply under the gray shock of hair. "Let me introduce myself," he said. "Then maybe you'll see what this young lady is driving at. I was the chaplain aboard the *Arcturus*. I'm still a chaplain—"

"Oh," said Kenton. "Oh..."

"Now do you get the idea, Keith? Never mind that question. I'll ask another one. Keith, do you love me? Tell me, because if you don't—"

"If I don't—what?" But Kenton was smiling as he took her in his arms, kissing her hair, her lips, her neck, and she was laughing and crying at the same time, and Kenton might have stayed with her that way all day, but the chaplain cleared his throat. As if on a signal, O'Keef and Larkin and Jenkins and a dozen other men came in, and a few women, and then the chaplain began the ceremony....

It wasn't a long ceremony, and Kenton was in pretty much of a daze all the way through. But when it was over he felt very much married, and he shook hands all around and everyone kissed Valerie until Kenton finally grabbed her and took her outside, where he did some kissing himself.

LATER THAT same day, George Bancroft came to the camp. This time there was no aircraft. George came suddenly and he came on foot, and the most surprising thing of all was the fact that he had a big black *S* on his forehead.

Kenton had been talking with Brian O'Keef in his shack, and as he came outside into the sunlight he saw Valerie arguing with someone. Kenton couldn't hear her words, but he could see her frowning, and the man's back was to him. He hurried over and stood beside Valerie, and the man was young and good-looking and Kenton recognized the soft voice as George's. But this was all wrong: the man had a black *S* on his forehead.

"Yes, Keith, it's George all right. You met under different circumstances last time. Mr. Bancroft, Mr. Kenton."

George nodded curtly, and Kenton said: "I didn't know you were a starman. I fought with you in the darkness that night on the starfield, but I didn't know you were a starman. Val never told me."

"He's not," Valerie said. "He never had the mark on his forehead before, and I've known him all my life. George is no starman."

George laughed. "Who said I'm not a starman? I have the black *S* on my forehead, so how can you say I'm not a starman?"

Kenton couldn't understand it. He had to believe Valerie, of course. If Valerie said George was not a starman, then he wasn't. But no one in his right mind would be branded with the black *S*, no one would submit himself to certain ostracism for no apparent reason. Then George must have a reason, he thought.

Valerie said, "He wanted to be a starman. Twelve years ago when the

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best blood on earth wanted to join the space fraternity, George wanted to be a starman. We were kids and we were friends then, and I remember how happy George was planning for it."

George scowled. "That's enough, Valerie."

"No, it's not enough. He planned for it and he dreamed of little else. But when he went to Luna to take the test at Spaceman's School, he couldn't make the grade. Psychologically unstable, they said, and George came back to earth. He's hated the starmen since then, even before the Sanction he hated them. So he had a head start on everyone else, and that's why he hates you so much now. Isn't that right, George?"

"Shut up, Valerie. It's purely by accident that I came here. That is, I came here on purpose, but I didn't know you were here. I came here to do a job and I'm going to do it, and when I'm through I'm going to take you back to the city and we'll be married."

KENTON laughed. "It's against the city law for a girl to marry a starman. Didn't you know that, George? It's against the law."

"I won't be a starman then," George assured him. "This black mark can come off, after it serves its purpose."

Kenton was about to ask him what purpose that was, but Valerie said: "I won't be able to marry you anyway. I'd be a bigamist. Kenton and I were married today. I'm Mrs. Kenton." She put her arm around Kenton's waist and she smiled up at him, and Kenton watched George's face flush an ugly crimson.

"We'll see about that," he said. "We'll see about it. As Kenton admitted, it isn't legal."

"It's legal enough. A chaplain performed the ceremony, and since we're going to live among the starmen, it's legal enough. Look, George, don't bother us: my husband doesn't like to be bothered, so please go away."

Again George laughed. "Why should I go away? I'm a starman and this is the starman camp."

A shadow loomed up near them, and Kenton looked into the smiling face of Brian O'Keef. "Hello, Brian," he said. "Here—"

"I see we have a new recruit, Kenton. Lord, how we can use him. Another arm to raid the city for us. What ship, lad?"

George smiled, and Kenton had to admit it was a winning smile. "I'm afraid I'm pretty much of a stranger. Name is George Bancroft. But you have no one here of the *Altair's* crew, do you?"

"No. Afraid we don't."

"Well, that's what I thought. I was the exec of the *Altair*, but I can't seem to find any of the crew in the hills. I'll live here if you let me—"

"Let you!" O'Keef roared. "We wouldn't let you get away! We can use men, son, we can use men. The *Altair*, eh?"

"Don't let him fool you, Brian," Kenton said. "I don't know what he wants here or why he's wearing the *S*, but this man is no starman. Ask my wife."

"He's not," Valerie said. "I've known him for years."

Brian smiled, and the grin was meant to be friendly, but it looked like a gargoyle-mask on his battered face. "You must be mistaken, ma'am. You have to be mistaken. Not a starman—that's crazy."

KENTON realized that it *did* sound crazy. It was ridiculous—no man in his right mind would wear the brand of a starman unless it were forced on him in the Sanction. Yet

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George wore it, and Valerie claimed George was no starman. How could you prove it? Kenton knew that you couldn't.

"—met this man," George was telling the grinning O'Keef. "It sounded like a good proposition, too, and I intended to take him up on it. I haven't run across him again, and that's why I'm here. But he said he'd be in the hills, visiting the camps, and when he comes here, I'm going with him."

Kenton had missed the first part of what George was saying, but he could see that O'Keef was jubilant. "Did you hear that, Keith, lad? Did you hear it?"

Kenton was suddenly very weary. He knew that George was up to something, but that he could do nothing about it. "No," he said. "I didn't hear. What, Brian?"

Valerie said, "Are you crazy? Are you both crazy? This man is not a starman. I know him. I've known him all my life. You've met him too, Kenton. You know he's not a starman."

"Sure," Kenton agreed. "But prove it. How can you prove it?"

"You're mistaken," O'Keef said patiently. "You have to be mistaken."

"Of course," George agreed, smiling. "The lady is thinking of someone else. Perhaps someone who looks like me. It doesn't take much to tell I'm a starman."

"Naturally," O'Keef said. "Naturally. But that's not the important thing. The important thing is what you said.

"How would you like to have that *S* removed, Kenton? How would you like to live again like a normal human being because there won't be anything to set you apart? How would you like to live without the brand of hate on your forehead where everyone can see it? How would you like that black mark removed, Kenton? Tell me, how would you like it?"

"I would love it," Kenton said, and he meant it.

"Well, Mr. Bancroft here knows a man who can do it! Don't you, Mr. Bancroft? That's what you said, isn't it?"

George nodded. "That's what I said. Of course, I can't be sure, because I only met the man once. But that's what he told me. I'm to work for him for three years. It's hard labor and he told me not to expect anything easy. But I'm to work for him for three years and then he removes the *S* from my forehead and I'm a free man. I'd break my back for *twenty* years for that. But just to work for three years, and then I'm free! Three years—"

"How about that, Kenton?" O'Keef demanded. "How about that? Valerie, your children won't have to be born and raised here in the hills. Kenton can work for three years like all of us, and he won't be a starman any longer. The black mark will be removed and he won't be a starman any longer. How about that?"

EVERYONE liked it. Everyone in the village loved it. They were so eager to believe it could happen that they took the unsupported word of this man, this stranger with the mark of the starman on his forehead. In a week George had won everyone over. In a week the whole camp had changed. For ten years they had been waiting and dreaming, as Kenton had been waiting and dreaming, for the time when the Sanction would be lifted and the great liners would rise again from the silent starfield. Then they would be there in their bright new uniforms, they would all be there, walking up the ramps two by two while the bands were playing, ready to take their people back into space again.

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Now all that was changed. They didn't think in those terms anymore. Now they waited for the coming of the man who could remove the black mark from their foreheads, and then they wouldn't be starmen. They didn't want to be starmen—they had had enough, and now they waited for the man who could take the mark of their identity away from them.

The first day, Kenton tried in vain to reason with them. The black *S* told them clearly enough that George was a starman, a member of the *Altair's* crew, and they wouldn't believe Kenton. He gave up after a day, and even Valerie stopped trying after the second day. That night they went out to their hill and looked up to the stars and the Milky Way was a wonderful bridge to something better, if only they could reach it. Kenton wanted to grasp out with his hands and pull it down, he wanted to take Valerie out to the stars with him. Soon he would be waiting alone. If George had his way, he would be waiting all alone.

It was exactly one week after the arrival of George that Kenton heard the droning. It was a sound he had not heard in ten years, and for a moment he thought a starship was up there someplace in the sky. But then he saw the huge swarm of dots on the horizon and realized a fleet of aircraft was approaching.

The fleet came closer, and Kenton watched the starmen scurry about their camp. They didn't know what to do—in ten years they had not seen so many aircraft together, and they were close to panic. But soon the fear passed. George passed the word around, and Kenton realized that everyone was too excited to ask him how he knew. George had told them the man who could remove the black mark was coming.

Soon the swarm of gyro-planes landed in the clearing, and the pilots came out. They stood in groups, uneasily, but one man walked boldly to the knot of starmen that had gathered about George and Brian O'Keef.

THE MAN WAS very big and very fat. Kenton had never seen such a fat man. The flesh hung from his jowls in great flabby chunks, and his round little eyes were deeply embedded. His clothing was beautifully tailored, but even so, his belly hung big and low over his belt.

George left the group and came over to him. "Mr. Atwell! You remember me, don't you, Mr. Atwell?"

Atwell considered, and the sweat clung to his face in big round beads. Then he nodded, and his loose jowls rolled up and down with the motion. "I remember you. I remember you vaguely. And I must apologize because I forget your name. But I met you on the outskirts of the city once. Now, as you can see, I'm ready to start things on a big scale. All ready. Everything's set now, and I've come into the hills for the starmen."

Brian O'Keef approached him and stuck out his big freckled hand. "Name's O'Keef. I'm sorta in command here. We work three years for you and then you remove the *S*? Is that the pitch?"

"That's the—uh—pitch. That's exactly what I offer. But let me tell you now, it will be hard work. Three years of hard work. There won't be an easy moment."

"We don't care. We don't care about that." The blue eyes sparkled under the flaming red hair. "What we want to do is get rid of the *S*. You can do that, and we'll work for you. When can we start?"

Atwell smiled and his small eyes were lost in the closing pockets of flesh. "We'll start now. I have these aircraft here for you, and we'll leave

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at once. Is that agreeable?"

Captain Harkness came forward. "We're starting at once, you say? At once?"

Atwell nodded.

"Larkin, have you the orbit mapped?"

"Yes, sir."

"Kenton, you're ready at the controls?"

"I'm all set," Kenton told him. "You can relax now, sir." Then Kenton turned to O'Keef. "Brian, I'm telling you for the last time that this is a trick. George, here, is not a starman. Valerie has known him all her life and he is not a starman. Once you work for this man Atwell, he'll have you. You'll never get away, because he'll know who you are. Even if he removes the black *S*, he'll still know who you are. It's a trick, Brian."

BUT O'KEEF waved him away with an impatient gesture, and now the starmen were filing into the gyroplanes. Two at a time they filed in, and they held their heads up and Kenton thought they could have been going back up the ramps to their starships.

Finally O'Keef said, "Well, Kenton, are you coming?"

"Of course I'm not coming! It's a trick. A low, stinking trick, and you're falling for it, Brian. Brian—"

"You're crazy, lad." And Brian had entered one of the airships.

George laughed in Kenton's face. George and a big giant of a man were alone with Kenton and Valerie now, and George laughed. "Well, Kenton, it looks as if you've lost."

There were tears in Valerie's eyes, but she smiled. "He hasn't lost, George. He hasn't lost. I'm still with Keith and we're together and you're the one who loses."

George flushed. The aircraft were taking off now, circling once, then heading away. Soon only one ship was left on the field. George stepped forward and slapped Valerie's face.

She fell back, raising a hand to her cheek, and Kenton sprang at George.

"You always want to be violent, Kenton," he said. Then he shrugged and crooked his finger at the giant waiting behind him.

The man lumbered forward. Valerie screamed. Kenton set himself and then swung his fists. He struck the giant full in the face, and he hit him hard, but the man shook the blows off like water. Then he clipped Kenton on the jaw with one huge hand, and Kenton felt himself falling. He tried to rise, but he could not, as he sank to his knees he saw Valerie striking at George's chest with her small hands, and he saw the giant lift her and tuck her under his arm like a doll.

The three of them reached the last airship. Kenton lay on his back, and everything began to reel. The clearing spun like a top, and the last thing he saw was the airship circling about above it...

CHAPTER V

THE MAN IN THE SQUARE

KENTON WAS stumbling back through the hills. He hardly remembered getting up, but he remembered the clearing, now empty, and he remembered calling Valerie's name, but he couldn't be sure because his voice sounded so strange there in the silence. His throat was dry and he had gone down to the spring and drank deep of its cool waters, and he was hungry, but he didn't stop for food. He had no time. He had to get back to the city on the hill. The fat man Atwell must have come from the city on the hill. Other cities were far away, and he must have come from

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the city on the hill.

It had taken Kenton and Valerie three days to get up and over the hills, but now in a day and a night Kenton was back at the starfield. He staggered to its edge and he wasn't surprised to find the ground car he had left at the foot of the hills. Few people came to the starfield.

He opened the door and climbed into the car and reached for the controls. His hands would not obey the orders of his brain. He slumped over the control panel and when he closed his eyes he saw Valerie's face and he thought he heard her scream.

He reached out but he could not touch her face and then he was sobbing her name and it mushroomed on his senses, driving everything else out. *Valerie*....

Kenton awoke with the sun in his eyes. He had reached the car at nightfall and now it was almost noon. He had not eaten in more than forty-eight hours and he was hungry.

He started the ground car and drove into the city. As long as he stayed in the car he was all right. No one would see the *S* on his forehead. The city hadn't changed. It was still small and crowded and at noon the throngs filled the streets. Kenton had a comparatively easy time driving because there were few cars. Not many people could afford them now.

Kenton found a cap in the car, a bright green plastic cap which he put on his head and pulled down low, and now he knew that unless one really looked for it, the *S* was invisible. He parked the car almost at the same spot where he had first taken it, and stepped out on the crowded street.

He saw the long line of weary people and learned that most of them were colonists. He stood at the end of the line as it moved slowly. When he reached the window a little old woman with gray hair handed him out a bowl of soup and a plastic spoon, and he ate eagerly. It was one of the synthetic grain soups and it tasted good to Kenton, warming him all the way down. Kenton returned his empty bowl and walked on down the street.

He didn't know where to go. That was the trouble. Although it wasn't a big city, it was a crowded one, and he didn't know where to look. Valerie might be anyplace here, a needle in a haystack...

Actually, he could not even be sure that Valerie was in the city on the hill. Atwell had a large fleet of aircraft, and they could have come from any place on the continent. Kenton did not want to think of this possibility. He had no means of transportation, and he did not want to think of it.

SUDDENLY, he was in the square. He had just gone on walking and his feet had taken him to the square. The first thing he noticed was that the statue was down. The great stone pedestal still stood and a little figure perched atop it, but the statue was gone.

And the square was crowded. He had been in the city many times and he had never seen the square this crowded before. The little figure atop the pedestal had the attention of the crowd. He was talking, but Kenton was still too far to hear the words. He did hear the angry restless buzzing of the crowd and he realized the people did not agree with the man on the pedestal.

There was something familar about that figure, and Kenton came closer. Someone said:

"What do you think of that, friend?"

Kenton said uneasily, "I don't know. I just arrived in the city and I don't know what's going on. Who

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is that man?"

"You got me there, friend. I saw the crowd and I came here to see what it was all about. I don't know who he is, and I don't like what he's saying. Something ought to be done about that. I think the guy's crazy. Listen."

Kenton listened. He still could not hear all the words, but he caught enough to know that the little man was talking about the starmen. He was saying that they were being unjustly persecuted, that they were the hope of the earth, that everyone had degenerated but not the starmen, and that if earth ever wanted to get back into space it had better realize which side its bread was buttered on.

Hoots came from the crowd. They were loud and it was an angry crowd and for a time Kenton could not hear the little man's voice. But there was something familiar about that bald-headed, bespectacled face. Kenton had seen it before. He tried to think where and for a time he couldn't. When he did it was too late.

Someone climbed up on the pedestal behind the little man and grabbed him around the waist. The little figure struggled, but he was helpless in the arms of the giant who held him and soon his legs were kicking as he was lifted off the pedestal.

The crowd surged forward, and Kenton was swept along in the tide. He did not want to see what would happen to the little man and he knew he could not help him, but the pressure of the crowd carried him forward.

They were pushing the little man back and forth and his glasses had been lost in the scuffle. He was panting and his arms were two thin little flails trying futilely to protect him. He tried to talk, but he was panting so much that the words would not come out.

SOON THERE was no room to push the little man, and somebody held him and shook. Other people tore at his clothing and Kenton found himself yelling a protest, but no one could hear him. He pushed forward on his own now—he had seen enough. He did not know what help he could be, but he wasn't going to stand by and let them tear the little man to pieces because he had befriended the starmen.

And then Kenton knew. *Befriended the starmen!* He remembered that day in the square, weeks before, when the mild little man was with him when the kids were throwing stones. The mild little man who stood in the clutches of the crowd because he still spoke for the starmen. Kenton did not know who he was, in fact he did not really care. He only knew that this was all wrong and that he could not let them do it and for one wild moment he forgot Valerie.

He tore into the crowd now, pulling them away from the little man, but no one bothered him. They simply thought he wanted to get closer himself so that he could go to work on the man who had no right to defend the hated starmen.

Kenton spun one man around roughly, and the big face glared at him. A blunt face, and Kenton recognized the man who had held him that day in the square. The man eyed him angrily, but Kenton still had on his cap and there was no recognition in the hateful eyes.

"Wait your turn, friend," said the blunt-faced man. "We all want to hit him. Just wait your turn."

Kenton could not do much against all those people, but he could steer the center of the mob away from the pedestal and toward one of the side streets. This was his plan and it was slow work. He saw the blood on the little man's face and the pathetic

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gestures of defense the small arms were making.

Now Kenton was directly behind the little figure and he grabbed him under the armpits and pushed. The mob wanted to follow, wanted to stay with the man and beat him, and gradually Kenton made his way to the side street. Once he almost fell under the rush of the crowd. But he knew that if he did he would never reach the little man again, and the small figure would be beaten to a pulp. Kenton held on grimly, and he pushed and occasionally he struck out with his hands. But no one noticed—it was a wild crowd and everyone was swinging his arms to hit someone if he could get them clear for a moment.

Kenton sensed there was something more to this. He was not merely saving the little man, he was saving more, much more. He did not know why he thought this, but the thought persisted. He was thinking of the little man as a symbol, and that might be the answer. Only that didn't explain anything. He knew that if he rescued the little man he also would rescue Valerie, that somehow their three destinies were interwoven, and that the fate of the starmen might hang in the balance too...

THE FRENZIED faces were leering at Kenton as he edged to the side of the square, and twice he had to reach out with one hand and push those faces away. He pushed the little man into one of the side streets and the crowd tried to swell through it after them. But the press was too great and only a few people got through. An arm reached out and the hand clutched at the little man, but it missed and struck Kenton high on the head instead. He felt the cap torn loose and he tried to reach up and grab it, but he was too late. Kenton's head was bare in the sunlight, and someone shouted in his ear:

"Starman! Starman! I'll be damned. It's a starman. No wonder he's helping the little guy."

There was a lot of noise and not many people heard him. Enough did, however, to make the situation a bad one for Kenton. Now the people who had pushed through to the side street with him were openly hostile, and Kenton found his way barred by a mob bent on stopping him and the old man.

Someone grabbed at Kenton's shoulder and wheeled him half about and a hard fist crashed against his temple. He felt his knees buckle. He did not know where the strength came from, but he picked up the little man and slung him across his shoulder, and then he ran. Feet pounded down the street behind him, and for a moment he was clear. Then faces appeared at the other end of the long, narrow alley and three men came plunging toward him.

They were less than a hundred feet ahead, and the mob was not half that distance behind him. On his left was a door, and, breathless now, he turned the knob and pushed. The door swung open and Kenton plunged inside with his burden. He dropped the old man down unceremoniously and he turned to the doorway. A man was halfway through it and Kenton lashed out with his leg and the man stumbled back, howling. Then Kenton slammed the door. It was a metal door with an old-fashioned bolt and he threw the bolt home. The fact that the door was of metal meant the house was one of the new ones which had been built hastily since the time of the Sanction, and what with the lawlessness in the streets, Kenton knew that the windows would be too high off the ground for anyone to

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reach them.

He ignored the pounding on the door and turned around. The little old man was staggering to his feet. Behind him Kenton saw a woman.

CHAPTER VI

THE PATH TO THE STARS

SHE WASN'T very young, although Kenton decided that she once must have been pretty. Now there were lines in her face and her hair was partly gray. She seemed very surprised.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Kenton smiled and said they were resting, and when the woman walked past him to the door he grabbed her arm and turned her around.

"Uh-uh," he said. "Definitely no. Stay away from that door and you won't get hurt."

"Just wait a minute," she snapped. "Who do you think you are? You come in here without knocking and now someone's pounding on the door—"

Suddenly she stopped. Her face turned white and Kenton let her arm go as she took a step away from him. She had seen the mark on his forehead. Kenton was smiling again. "Yes, I'm a starman. But don't worry, I don't bite and it isn't catching."

"Get out."

Kenton told her to sit down and she looked at him for a long moment, then moved over to a chair and made herself comfortable. Kenton began to walk around the room and the woman watched every move he made.

"Is there another way out of here?" Kenton asked.

"What do you mean, another way?"

"Another door. Anything. An exit."

"There's the roof. My husband is with the police and he has a gyroplane, but it's not there now. When he comes back—"

"A gyro-plane, eh?" Kenton was thinking fast. He could still hear the crowd outside, but now the pounding had ceased. The voices carried and they were angry voices and he knew that soon they would bring a weapon and blast open the door.

"Anyone else in the house?" Kenton demanded.

"Um, no."

Someone yelled, "Mother. Hey, Ma—"

"No," said Kenton, smiling. "No one else is in the house."

"You leave my boy alone."

"Don't worry, lady. Not only don't we starmen eat people, we don't eat children either."

THE KID came in and he was about eight, short and too fat, with curly red hair and buck teeth. "Hey, Ma, I wanna—" And then he began to bawl. He had seen the little old man's beaten face and he saw the starman's mark on Kenton's forehead, and he began to bawl. He didn't stop, and it got on Kenton's nerves.

He shrugged and turned to the little old man. "You okay?"

"Well, I'm not exactly feeling chipper, young man, but I think I'll live—that is, if the mob doesn't get to me again. That's the trouble; it's been the trouble all the time. I really shouldn't, but I always want to make speeches. Say, don't I know you, young man?"

"We've met before. In the square, the day they were to take down the statue, remember?"

The old man said that he did and that he was glad to see Kenton again and that he had made up his mind about something. He was about to

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say what it was, but then they heard a faint droning, followed by a gentle thud on the roof.

"That would be your husband," Kenton told the woman.

She jumped out of her chair and before Kenton could stop her she was running up the stairs to the roof. Kenton sprang after her in time to see her legs disappearing above him through the trap door. When he pushed the door open, the man who faced him was holding a gun.

It was one of the emgee weapons that had been developed just before the Sanction, and Kenton knew it as a deadly thing.

"Okay, starman," the husband said. "Okay, just march right back down those stairs and relax. Come on, move."

Kenton turned slowly and started down the stairs, the man right behind him. This was his last chance, the last chance for everything, and the cold tube of an emgee gun was a foot from his head. He could hear the kid, still bawling downstairs, and from above, the woman climbing down behind her husband. She said, "I'm proud of you, Harold. Really proud. A trouble-making starman right in our own house, and you've captured him—"

Kenton stopped suddenly, crouching. The small of his back hit against the man's knees and the man yelled in alarm. Then Kenton lost his balance and the emgee gun went off and he felt the ray burn past his cheek. Something heavy came down on his back and tumbling over and over, the man went plunging down the stairs. When he reached the bottom he lay still. Kenton called once to the little man and turned again to climb the stairs.

From above, the woman's foot kicked out and caught him high on his right cheek. Kenton stumbled and nearly fell. His head reeled, and it seemed there were three women above him on the stairs, all getting ready to kick again. Kenton grabbed the foot of the middle woman and then everything came into focus again. He held on to the foot and the woman screamed. She sat down and put her head in her hands and began to cry and Kenton didn't stop to quiet her.

He stood on the roof and soon the little old man appeared through the trap door and joined him. They ran to the gryo-plane and climbed in. At first Kenton had the same difficulty he had had with the ground car those weeks ago, but soon the aircraft rose up from the roof. Kenton looked down and saw the crowd hovering around the door of the house, and then he raised the craft higher and gunned it away from the city.

IT WAS night and the winds blew in from the north over the starfield. Kenton stood on the *Deneb's* ramp with the little old man. "You know, I don't even know who you are."

"I told you once I am a tourist. That's the truth."

"From where?"

"From—there." He pointed up into the sky.

"How can that be? You're an earthman and there's the Sanction, so how can you be from space?"

"I assure you, I am. One thing you forget is the fact that ten years ago, before the Sanction, there were three billion colonists. Three billion.

"You starmen brought them back. Or, that is, you brought most of them back. But some really wanted to stay. Maybe they foresaw what conditions on earth would be like when the population was doubled and the star-trade was ended, and they didn't want to go back. Not many, but some. Some hid out."

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"So you—"

"Yes. I'm a colonist. There are several thousand of us, living mostly in the Antarian System. We've worked for ten years, *and we have tentative permission to take earth back into space.*"

Kenton didn't say a word. He couldn't. He was suddenly choked up inside and no words would come out. Here was what he had been dreaming about for ten years; now it was a reality.

"I know what you're thinking," the little man said. "Well, don't be too hopeful. There are conditions. Any earthmen I take out into space must be worthy of it. I'm the delegate. It's up to me. If I take the wrong ones and anything happens, we're through for all time. This the Interstellar Council swore. And all this rabble—they've degenerated in ten years. I can't take them. Who can I take up to the stars? Tell me that, who can I take?"

Kenton said, "You can take me. Me, Keith Kenton. You can take me. I'm a starman. You can take me and every other starman on earth. Almost half a million of us. We could lead the way back to the stars for earth."

"That's exactly what I've been thinking. I've felt it all along. It's the only hope. We can start with just one shipload. But we've got to work fast. Someone spotted me working on the *Deneb* recently—"

"Then it's the *Deneb* you'll take up?"

"Yes. I thought you knew. I came in a small ship, by myself, and it crashed near the ocean. I got out alive because it only was a slight crash, but my own ship is down on the beaches somewhere to the east.

"No matter, Kenton. The important thing is that we've got to go quickly. People have seen me tampering with the *Deneb*. It must have been a rare accident that brought them here, but they saw me. That doesn't give us much time. I've repaired the ship and it's just about ready for flight. Get those starmen and we will start—"

KENTON BEGAN to laugh. He sat down on the ramp of the *Deneb* and kept on laughing. The old man shook him by the shoulders, but he couldn't stop him. Kenton roared.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Nothing's funny." Abruptly Kenton wasn't laughing anymore. "Nothing's funny at all. But I can't get any starmen. I can't get any starmen at all, and if people from the city saw you they'll be here before too long to see who's tampering with the *Deneb*. It's a taboo now; it's against the law. The police will be here."

"Why can't you get the starmen?" the little man protested. "In the city they tell me that the hills are filled with them."

"Not any more. Not now. Somebody came along with a fantastic plan to get rid of the *S* brand on their foreheads in exchange for some kind of labor, and they all went with him. And they took my wife—Valerie..."

Then Kenton told him the whole story, all of it. When he finished, the old man sat in silence, rubbing his cheek thoughtfully.

"Some kind of labor, you say?"

Kenton nodded.

"In the city?"

"I don't think so. I came back to the city because I had no place else to go, but I don't think it can be in the city. Nearby, maybe, but not around here. The new influx of so much labor would be noticed."

The old man stood up. "Then let's go to sleep, Kenton. If we can get through the night without them finding us, we should be all right. No one will come out here at night; not

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with all the ghosts that ten years of superstition have created. And then tomorrow we'll find your starmen."

Kenton asked him how.

"Not now. Not now. I'll tell you tomorrow. I want some sleep, Kenton—and you can use it too. Let's turn in."

But Kenton did not sleep. He tossed restlessly inside the *Deneb* all night, waiting for the morning to come. After the first elation over the prospect of going back into space had passed, he felt depressed. They could go back into space, *if* they could find the starmen—and there was absolutely no clue as to where the starmen might be....

Kenton knew that he would never go back into space without taking Valerie with him. Valerie of earth, Valerie who had never left earth, and Kenton the starman. His hopes, his dreams, must wait until she was back in his arms....

THEY AWOKE early and breakfasted on food the old man had stored within the ship. Kenton didn't feel like eating, but he knew he needed it and he put away a good-sized breakfast. When they went outside, it was raining. The rain was coming down hard and the brisk wind swept it in sheets across the starfield.

Kenton said, "Okay, what now? You said last night you had an idea. Let's have it."

"Relax, Kenton. Take it easy. You're too jumpy, and you'll need your nerve today. We should be able to find your starmen, and from what you've told me, there may be trouble."

Kenton shrugged. "We'll get to that when we reach it. First we've got to find them."

"That won't be hard. You don't think they're in the city, because so much activity would be noticed. I agree. But you think they're nearby. Very well, we'll assume that, too. It makes good sense. Nearby, but not in the city—and we have a gyroplane. We'll find them. We'll fly until we see the center of a lot of activity, and then we'll find them."

It was that simple. It was that simple, yet Kenton hadn't even thought of it. It might be just simple enough to work.

The rain felt good to Kenton. It seemed to be cleansing the air. Dripping wet, they plunged into the gyroplane, and Kenton started the rotors. Soon they were in the air over the starfield, and, through the rain, everything below seemed gray and drab.

"It won't be easy to see anything," Kenton said.

"I know it. But the rain has an advantage, too. No one will be out to investigate the *Deneb* in this weather. It gives us another day, if we need it."

Kenton had an idea they would need it. Down below, he could see almost nothing through the rain.

It was mid-afternoon when the old man pointed toward the horizon with a finger that trembled. "See it, Kenton?"

Kenton looked. He squinted into the rain and the darkness. Off on the horizon, the broad circular area of light was the size of a one-credit coin.

"That would be it, Kenton. That would be it." The old man's voice was shaking.

They reached the area finally, and swooped low above it. There seemed to be no one out in the rain, but there were scores of tents and one long low building. And in the middle of the clearing, Kenton saw where the glow was coming from. It was a dull orange, almost yellow area—circular, about fifty feet across.

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Kenton scowled. "If I didn't know it was impossible, I'd say—"

"What would you say, Kenton?"

"I'd say that was the launching pit for an old-fashioned rocket ship. But that can't be. Rockets haven't been around for five hundred years, not after the space-drive and then the hyper-drive. So how could that be a launching pit?"

"I don't know how, Kenton—and I don't know why. Only that's what it is."

THEY BROUGHT the gyro-plane down and stepped out into the rain. There was no one in the clearing. It was a new camp; Kenton could tell by the freshly cut trees. But it was deserted, utterly deserted.

Kenton shrugged helplessly. They walked into the one building and found that it was a machine shop. Or it had been. Now it was stripped almost bare. At the rear they found a little office, but the only thing of interest there was a folder of bills. Kenton looked through it carefully and discovered that the material listed on them would be ideal for one of the old-type rocket-ships. Only it didn't make sense. That type of ship hadn't been used in over five-hundred years, and were so obsolete that it seemed incredible anyone would want to make one. Yet, outside, the slag still glowed in the blasting pit.

"I don't know," Kenton admitted. "I don't understand a thing."

The old man shrugged. "Look. It's a little late to tell you, I suppose, but my name is Wilton. It was Professor Wilton before I came on this mission to earth. I was a professor of logic at the remaining earth colony in the Antarean System. I've got a logical mind." He smiled. "At least I hope I have. So let's get organized in a logical way. Let's look at this thing clearly. Why would they build an old-type rocket ship, and where would they go in it?"

Kenton considered. "Well, they'd build an old-type rocket because they couldn't build a new space ship."

"Hardly," said Wilton. "You forget that there's a whole field of them near the city."

"H-m-m. Well, if they didn't know how to operate the new type—?"

"Starmen? Ridiculous."

"I know. I know the answer now. They don't have fuel for a modern ship, so they had to build an old one."

"That's more like it." Wilton reached into his pocket and pulled out a little capsule. "Here's fuel for a space-drive and for a hyper-drive, in the new compact form. There's probably not another grain of it on earth; it all was destroyed ten years ago. I brought this with me from the Antarean System, and it's much more than enough to get the *Deneb* back there. But without any of it, that whole starfield of ships is useless."

"Like the old ocean ships without an ocean."

Wilton laughed. "Hardly a good analogy, but you get the idea. Now then, that's why they built the ship. All right: for what purpose did they build it?"

"That," said Kenton, "beats the hell out of me. I don't know."

"Well, maybe *I* do. The Sanction cleared earth out of space, you know. *But it didn't force us out of the solar system.* It never did that. And this man you mention—this man who promised to remove the black *S* for three years of labor—what sort of labor do you suppose he had in mind?"

"I don't know," Kenton said. "I don't know." They were on the track of something, and he knew it.

"Well, how about this? For ten years the human race has been earth-bound, and poor as hell. The standard

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of living has fallen through the floor. Not enough jobs, not enough mineral matter to keep things going—"

"Yeah!" Kenton roared. "I see it! This Atwell has an idea. A potent one, too. He'd go back into space, into the limited space we have, and start to carve an empire for himself of the mineral wealth in the solar system. And all he'd need for that would be—an old-fashioned rocket-ship!"

"Precisely. And where would he go with his starmen laborers on the first trip?"

"Where? How should I know? The moon, Mars, Venus, the Jovian Satellites—how should I know?"

"He'd go to the moon. That's closest, and he'd go there because it would be as good a place to start as any. He'd go to the moon, and he's on his way there now. Even after the head start he's got, we could beat him in the *Deneb*. We could get there first. Which is exactly what we're going to do..."

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRMAMENT

THE BEAUTIFUL thing about these starships, Kenton thought, was the fact that they were almost automatic. You had to check the course and you had to check on little details. But when you were just hopping from one planet to another in the same system, it was a lark. The hyper-drive was different, of course. That was complicated, and you'd need a smoothly functioning crew to keep a ship going in hyper-space.

But now Kenton was ready in the *Deneb*, and he waited tensely beside Wilton as they prepared for the take-off. It brought him back to a day, ten years ago, in the Fomalhaut System—and he began to tremble. He tried to brush the thought from his mind and he could not. But then he thought of Valerie, and he knew she was somewhere in space now, perhaps on her way to the moon in a new version of an antiquated rocket—and he forgot all about Fomalhaut.

"Ready?" Wilton demanded, and when Kenton nodded, the little man carefully emptied the contents of the small capsule into the tiny fuel chamber of the *Deneb*. The *Deneb* was a big ship, five hundred feet long and larger than any in the fleet except the *Arcturus*, Kenton knew, but that cylinder had enough fuel in it to take the ship to Antares and back. The old man had said so.

Wilton said, "What about the monitors, Kenton? Doesn't the Council have monitors?"

Kenton shook his head. "They do, but it won't bother us. We're allowed freedom inside the solar system—out to a hundred million miles beyond Pluto's orbit, and about a fiftieth of a parsec 'north' and 'south' of the solar equator."

"How did they figure on those distances?"

"That's easy. No captain would dare turn on the hyper-drive within that range, not if he cared what happened to the sun and the planets. And you can't go very far in one lifetime without the hyper-drive."

Then Kenton was busy at the controls, and the *Deneb* lifted gently from the starfield. It was hard to believe the ship held so much thunderous power within its walls. Kenton had always felt this way ten years ago and before, and he felt it now. The *Deneb* hovered above the field for a moment, a great metal dart there in the rain, and Kenton wondered if anyone from the city saw it. Then he opened up the space-drive and suddenly the view of the starfield and the city was gone.

Kenton leaned back and relaxed. "We'll be on the moon in thirty minutes," he said. There was a tightness

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in his voice which he could not control. He was in space again. It was only a leap of a quarter of a million miles, a merest fraction of an inch by celestial reckoning, but he was in space again. He looked out at the stars—bright, steady pinpoints against a velvet background—something you never saw through earth's obscuring atmosphere. And his thoughts were of Valerie....

HE PUT the *Deneb* down on a great flat expanse of pumice not far from Tycho's crater. And then the long watch began. The half-hour's flight was as nothing. Looking back on it, Kenton hardly had been aware of the leap across space at all, but now he could see the huge crescent of earth in the sky, pale blue and green and gray, and he kept his eyes at the scope. He wouldn't sleep until Wilton forced him away from the scope almost bodily, and then only when Wilton promised his own eyes would be glued to the instrument until Kenton awoke.

The moon was a wild dead place, but Kenton had seen too much of space to be thrilled by it. The fact that he had left earth was exhilarating in itself, but without Valerie he knew he could not appreciate it.

It was Kenton who saw the rocket on the second day. It was a tiny black dot against the bright globe of earth, invisible through the unaided eye. He shouted to Wilton, he pounded him until the little man awoke, and then he cried:

"See, Wilton? See? The ship! I'm not wrong, Wilton, am I? You see the ship, don't you? Look—"

Wordless, Wilton took the scope and peered within. He straightened and nodded his head. "It's the rocket, all right. How long, Kenton? When will it be here?"

"That's hard to say. About a day, I think. Twenty-four hours. Maybe sooner. I can't be certain."

Hours later, they could see the rocket easily without the scope, and soon after that the little black dot disappeared in the southern sky. Kenton took the *Deneb* up, and they could see the black dot to the south, breathing fire against the yellow pumice of the moon.

Then the rocket was down. Kenton saw the fire belch from its fore-tubes, and he saw it land.

"They'll get the surprise of their lives," Wilton said. "The last thing they will expect is another spaceship."

"Exactly what I figure, and the sooner we get there, the more surprise there'll be in our favor. I'll take the ship in, and you get a couple of spacesuits ready. You might check and see if there are any emgee guns in the supply room, too."

"I already have. There's a whole arsenal back there, Kenton. I'll be back in a moment."

The rocket had landed near one of the old abandoned earth bases on the moon, and as Wilton returned, Kenton brought the *Deneb* down a few hundred yards away, on the other side of the silent dome. Men were back on a foreign world after ten years, and Kenton felt a sense of exhilaration.

He got into his spacesuit. After all these years, it felt cumbersome, but the emgee gun in his hands gave him confidence. He opened the airlock and moved along the narrow tunnel ahead of Wilton. A moment later the outer door swung in toward them, and Kenton stepped out onto the surface of the moon.

The mechanism of his spacesuit quickly adjusted gravity to earth-norm, and he made his way around the edge of the glassite dome, Wilton following.

Ahead was the rocket, and Kenton began to run toward it. It was an incredibly small ship compared with the

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Deneb—not more than seventy-five feet long and half as wide, a bulky ponderous ship for its small size, resembling the pictures of Twenty-third Century rockets Kenton had seen.

They stood at the rocket's airlock door, waiting. Kenton leaned the fishglobe headpiece of his spacesuit against the hull of the ship, and presently he heard the hum of machinery which told him the lock was opening. He could feel his heart pounding, pounding so hard against his chest that it made him dizzy. The door swung in.

Kenton leaped in behind it.

THREE SPACESUITED figures stood in the narrow metal tunnel, staring open-mouthed at Kenton. Through the fishbowls he saw the three faces turn white, and then one of the men darted back and was pounding on the inner door. Kenton saw the outer door start to close, and Wilton got in just in time. Then the inner door swung open, and Kenton and Wilton followed the three men into the rocket.

With one hand he held the emgee gun on them, and with the other he took off his fishbowl. The air in the rocket was stale, but Kenton did not mind. Ten feet away stood Valerie.

She cried, "Keith! Oh, my darling!" Then she was in his arms and Kenton hoped Wilton would be holding the men off with his own emgee gun. But he didn't care. He could not feel Valerie's body against him through the bulk of his spacesuit, but her lips were soft on his, and that was enough.

George Bancroft had been one of the spacesuited men, and the whiteness of his face remained under the Black *S*, but now it was the whiteness of rage. "Kenton," he growled. "Kenton..." The sound came out through clinched teeth.

Kenton herded them out of the rocket. He herded every last man out, and the very last was the huge figure of Atwell. His spacesuit was a special one—an ordinary suit would not have fitted his great bulk. He glowered at Kenton without speaking, but Kenton had never before seen such hatred in one pair of eyes—eyes small and almost hidden in folds of flesh.

It was easy. Kenton sensed that it was too easy. The starmen, of course, were happy after their initial shock, and flame-haired Brian O'Keef pounded Kenton on the back wildly after Wilton had told his story. "Back to space, lads," Brian kept mumbling. "Back to space..."

Kenton was too busy to listen. Jenkins and Larkin piloted the *Deneb* back to the starfield near the city on the hill, and Valerie was in Kenton's arms all the way back to earth.

THEY LANDED in the field with hardly a bump, and through the port Kenton could see the throngs of people outside. The *Deneb* had been missing from its place on the field, and the people had seen it returning.

Atwell snickered. "What now, Kenton? Go out there and they will kill you."

Kenton laughed. "Who's going out? I'm not. You and your men and George Bancroft are going out, but the rest of us remain. We're going into space."

Kenton had become careless. Half an hour ago, on the moon, there had been no resistance, and now he no longer held his emgee gun. Atwell reached into his jacket quickly, so quickly for all his size that Kenton could not stop him. When his hand reappeared it held an emgee gun. "That's where you're wrong, Kenton. March."

Atwell prodded him with the gun, and Kenton stood up. With Atwell behind him, he moved toward the air-

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lock. He heard Valerie call out, but he didn't turn to look back at her. He had been so near to everything he wanted—so near but not near enough. The taking of the *Deneb* was the violation of a taboo which would bring the death sentence—if not legally, then at the hands of the crowd. Not for Atwell, no. Only for the starmen.

"Just you," Atwell purred. "You're the only one I want out there, Kenton. I'll need the rest of them on the moon, after I convince the government how we can put the starmen to work for us in the solar system to make earth rich again. But not you, Kenton. You won't be there. You deserve something else. Now, march."

Kenton marched, and he was aware that George Bancroft was beside him, flanking his right side as Atwell flanked his left. George said, "You see, Kenton, you didn't get Valerie after all. She may not know it now, but she's mine."

Kenton struck out with his open hand and hit George across the mouth. The blow jarred the big blond man, but before Kenton could follow up his advantage, Atwell clipped him across the base of his skull with the emgee gun, staggering him. Valerie ran to him, crying his name, but George pushed her violently away.

The airlock was open now, the ramp extended, and still there wasn't a sound from the crowd.

And then the sound came up in a mighty wave. "Starmen!" As one, the people surged forward. They had been on edge, Kenton realized, ever since the *Deneb* was gone—and now that it had returned and two out of three of the first men to emerge had the black *S* on their foreheads, that was too much.

The mob reached the foot of the ramp, and George, still smiling, pushed Kenton forward, saying, "Here's your starman. Take him." No one heard him, and he said it again, this time roaring the words above the growl of the crowd. "Take him!"

"Starmen!" It came again from the mob, and now a stone struck George's shoulder. He winced with pain and looked surprised. Then he understood and he put his hand to his forehead and screamed. "No!" he cried. "No, wait—"

More stones came, some of them striking Kenton. He staggered for a moment at the edge of the ramp before pulling himself back. Atwell had lost all control. The emgee gun was still in his hand, but it was meaningless. He stood there on the center of the ramp, and sweat oozing out in ugly beads on his face. Kenton shoved him and he fell and rolled down the ramp. Eager hands caught him at the bottom, and Kenton heard his screams above the noise of the crowd. The people from the city had seen the black *S* on Kenton's forehead and they saw one on George's, and they had assumed the *Deneb* was manned entirely by starmen.

Kenton turned and stumbled back up the ramp, a score of people clamoring at his heels. One reached out and Kenton heard an insane laugh. "I'm no starman!" The voice was sobbing through the laughter, and he knew it was George.

Eager hands helped Kenton back into the lock and slammed it shut. George was still outside, and through the port Kenton could see him clutching with his fingers at the black S which would not come off his forehead. From within the ship, a lever lifted the ramp and everyone outside rolled off. George was lost in the crowd as the *Deneb* rose up from the field.

THEY MADE one more stop on earth. The *Deneb* was lowered again on the other side of the starfield, and Brian O'Keef forced

(continued on page 116)

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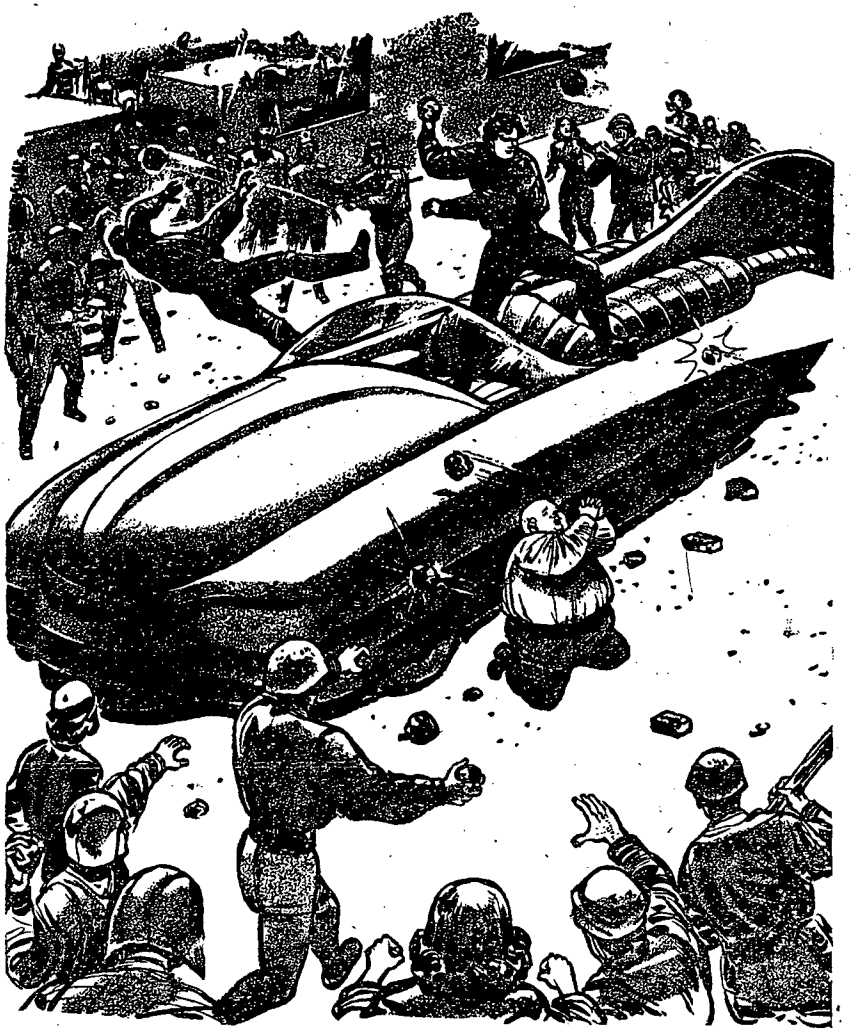
. . . DIVIDED WE FALL



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By Raymond F. Jones

Not until the girl he loved became a hunted thing, branded as a freak, did Arthur Zoran declare war on all mankind!

THE EIGHTEEN-MONTH job on Cyprian II was done and Arthur Zoran was coming home. Counting travel time both ways, he had been away from Earth a full two years.

Through his stateroom window he watched the disc of Earth, growing as the liner neared home. He imagined the face of Ardyth framed in that circle like a picture in a locket. He could see her as he remembered her, a piquant, inquisitive face with very wide, brown eyes. Her expression was one of perpetual amazement at the wonder of the common things of Earth. Her hair was deep, golden brown, cut short and pressed close to her head in the fashion of the times —which Arthur did not like.

She'd be waiting there at the pier for him; she'd spot him as he left the port and ran down the gangway. She'd wave and call his name in that breathless voice that could send little chills through him. Then she'd be in his

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arms again, and everything would be as it was before.

Two years.

Six letters.

He sat at the desk and glanced at those letters, which he had laid out there. He didn't need to look at them any more. He knew them by memory now.

The most recent was six months old—three months to reach him, plus his own three month journey home. None of the letters was the kind a man expects to receive from the woman he is to marry. Only the first one, which arrived on the next ship after he reached Cyprian II, was full of loss at his leaving and anticipation of the time he would return.

The second and third were heavily censored until scarcely a single intelligible line remained. It was a strange and frightening thing, for there had been no censorship when Arthur left Earth, nor any cause for such.

The men of his work crew were equally puzzled and alarmed by their own communications from home, so heavily garbled by the black swabs, but no one had any answers.

Then these final three letters came through complete as if censoring had been abandoned, but Ardyth spoke then as if Arthur had fully understood the earlier ones.

"The eradication of Syns has gotten fully out of hand," she wrote. "Some of us have begun to wonder if the world will ever be the same again. It can't be for those of us who have seen helpless creatures dragged through the streets and killed by crazed mobs.

"We know the Syns are not human, perhaps not even living things in any sense, but that does not excuse the brutality and terror that has swept the cities. No one feels safe or sure these days. His most intimate friends might turn out to be Syns, to be dragged away and slaughtered. People hardly speak to one another any more. Workers go from the laboratories and offices to their homes and lock themselves in with their families and the streets at night are ghostly places were sometimes Syns prowl and kill—"

THERE WAS more—much more, for Ardyth had seemed to be pouring out the terror of her heart in that final letter, but it was all equally meaningless to Arthur Zoran. He had heard rumors of Syns from other sources in this final year. A group of workmen brought in from a job nearer home had carried with them stories of the terror that walked the streets of Earth's cities, particularly midwestern America where the thing seems to have started. They said that the term, Syn, was a corruption of Synthetic Men. But their stories were still second and third hand.

It sickened Arthur to think that this was what he and Ardyth would have surrounding them as they began their lives together. Most of all, it sickened him to think what it might have done to her. Her letters were as if she had forgotten every dream they had dreamed together. Not once—since that first time—had she mentioned the things they had planned, the white house, the great trees like those of Harold and Dorothy Weaver with whom she lived.

He would have brought Ardyth to Cyprian and signed on for another construction period, but even that had become impossible. A total ban against leaving Earth had been in effect for almost a year. Only the carefully screened crews of ships were allowed to leave, and Arthur had not seen any of these until three weeks ago. It was a series of long and unorganized hops from Earth to Cyprian II. Earth liners covered only half the distance.

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The rest of the way was by increasingly decrepit freighters and tubs of all kinds.

The crew members of the liner he was on were as close mouthed as clams. He had exulted at the first sight of them and let go with all the questions he had bottled up for more than a year. They refused a single answer. His fellow passengers, coming home from scattered points of expatriation, were equally ignorant.

Burning sunlight advanced upon the port that looked into his room, and the automatic shades twisted to block out the invading rays and cast an ochre hue upon the air.

It was a sick dismal color, thought Arthur, the color of death. The color of the world to which he was going if he could believe but half of what he had heard.

He watched his hands resting upon his thighs. They looked like the hands of a mummy in that light. Shrunken and dehydrated by the long, unhealthful stay on Cyprian II, he was partly glad that Ardyth hadn't been permitted to come. He would not have wanted to see her become like himself, for it was the way all Earthmen became under those conditions.

THE ANNUNCIATOR chimed and a smooth baritone voice spoke in the room with sudden, gentle persuasion.

"All passengers will please come at once to the main dining salon. Instructions and preparations for landing must begin, and you are to be acquainted with the changes that have taken place upon Earth since you last saw it. This information is vital to everyone. Stewards will make a roll call and account for every passenger, so your cooperation and presence will be appreciated."

In the corridor, Arthur joined the other passengers slowly making their way toward the dining salon. There was little of shipboard gaiety among them. Through the journey their spirits had gradually dampened until a shroud of mutual hostility enfolded each like an invisible coccoon.

Arthur nodded to the few acquaintances he had. There was Ian McCarthy, a heavy, bronzed man of middle age, an explorer whose own ship had foundered many months ago and left him helpless until his accidental discovery. There were a couple of businessmen returning from extensive overseeing of their foreign properties.

These were about the sum of his acquaintances except for a slim figure of a girl who slipped into step beside him. When he became aware of her presence he did not know how long she had been there. She spoke suddenly in a frightened whisper of a voice. "It's about the Syns, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. I've never gone through anything like this before."

Her name was Jan Mercer, and she reminded him greatly of Ardyth with her small trim head of hair so neatly pressed into place. She had spoken to him frequently during the long days past, but he knew nothing of her.

"I wish I had never come back," she whispered.

He found them seats near the front of the room. He could not help noticing the trembling of her hands and lips.

"I had a friend, once, who was a Syn," she offered an explanation.

"Then you know! Tell me what it means—"

She shook her head. "You'll soon learn."

He wondered what kind of terrors this slender, frightened girl had seen. But he knew it was useless to press her for answers.

There was little murmuring among

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the passengers as they gathered. There were only three hundred of them, which was less than a third the capacity of the ship. The room felt cold although the temperature was adequate. It seemed as if already they were coming into the cloud of fear that hung about the Earth, its deepening mist sucking warmth and humanity out of them.

CAPTAIN TANNER, master of the vessel, rose before the group as the stewards reported the last of the passengers accounted for. He was a tall, gray-haired man whose face was lined not alone with age and responsibility of his profession but with a heavy regret as if he had somehow betrayed that profession by bringing them all back to Earth.

His voice was too low to be heard by those in the rear of the group, but all he said was. "Your response is appreciated, ladies and gentlemen. I present Captain Fairchild of Central Security, who has a message for you."

The CS man seemed the only one in the whole room who was sure of himself. He approached the speaker's point with the assurance of a military commander who knows that he, personally, does not have to meet the enemy. His florid face was grim and his voice ponderous.

"All of you here," he said, "have been away from Earth for more than a year. Since you have been away, few of you have learned more than rumors of the tragic events that have occurred in your absence. You have probably heard the term, Syn, in these rumors. Let me tell you what Syn means.

"Almost two years ago there came to one of our mental hospitals a patient with the fantastic story that he was not a human being but an artificial production that had been turned out in one of the chemical research plants under Borg-K type logic-engine control. Routine analysis showed that this was not part of his insanity, but it was incredibly true. The punched molecules of his brain showed a variation and alteration that could not have come about in any known growth process. Electroencephalographs proved this. Their structure was analyzed thoroughly on the great Borg-K machine of the Allied Control Company. This confirmed the unbelievable story."

Arthur Zoran was startled as if a stranger had suddenly called his own name. Allied was the company for which he worked. The great Borg-K machine, which they called Eddie, was one he had helped build, at least in its expansions. And it was the logic-engine laboratory that he had supervised before leaving for Cyprian II.

"Not only did the logic engine show this man's story to be true," continued Fairchild, "it also revealed that many hundreds of thousands of these creatures of the same kind had been produced and turned loose among humanity. We learned how to identify them by an encephalogram analysis determined with the help of Allied's logic engine.

"The only thing we did not learn —and have not yet learned—is where these creatures are being produced. We know the how because we have actually duplicated the process with the aid of information provided by the logic engine. The creatures were given the name of Synthetic Men, and from this came Syn."

The room was hushed as if some alien thing had come into their midst and might have assumed the form of the person sitting next to each passenger. Arthur glanced at Jan Mercer. Her face was white and immobile.

"Each of you can guess in your own minds what this has meant on Earth," said the CS officer. "These

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Syns have been moving steadily into human society, taking their places among men. Some have appeared as old men and women, others as young people, some as children. In ten thousand devious ways they have taken up life among us, even going to the extent of marrying human beings. And because of the destruction of population records during the War, it has not been suspected until now that these were not bona fide members of society. Ninety percent of the present population is without known filial relationships.

"The obvious and avowed purpose of the Syns is to replace humanity with what they consider a higher form of life. So far, they have given no evidence of intent to conquer by open warfare. But, like weeds growing in a garden, they hope to take over the entire garden for themselves.

"In every city of Earth we have set up inspection centers. Once a month the entire population is tested by electroencephalograph. Before you leave this ship each of you will be given such a test. In spite of the ban on travel from Earth, we pick up some Syns returning to Earth, having left before the ban.

"The human race will not be safe until these creatures are wiped out, until we destroy the reproduction centers from which they come. Our own technical organization is so complex that we have not been able to shut it down long enough or search deeply enough to find this source.

"It is a bitter world to which you are returning, and I offer no apology for it. The facilities of the entire world are concerned with the one task of destroying the Syns. If something of human dignity is being lost in the process—as you will find is the case—it is a small and temporary loss in order to wipe out this evil in our midst.

"If any one doubts the urgency of this, consider for the moment: The man sitting next to you—the man or woman to whom you are married—any of these may be a Synthetic Man intent upon replacing and destroying you."

THE CS MAN sat down, and Captain Tanner stood again to give instructions in his tired voice for the testing of each passenger before landing.

Arthur Zoran scarcely heard this. He was still trying to digest the things that Fairchild had spoken. Arthur *knew* logic engines and factory controllers. That one of these should get out of kilter and start making artificial human beings was beyond his comprehension.

But the CS man believed it and, apparently, so did the rest of the world. There must be some additional truth somewhere that was as fantastic as this explanation which he could scarcely force himself to accept.

The passengers rose and moved from the room. Each glanced more coldly and more fearfully at his neighbor than before as they made their way towards the privacy and security of the lonely cells.

Jan immediately lost herself in the crowd without a word to Arthur. He went alone to the solitary stateroom prison. There, he sat down on the bed and stared out at Earth's green disc. In the half million years since human forms of life appeared upon it, there had been spawned numberless and nameless kinds of horror. His parents and Ardyth's had known the War, and *their* grandparents likewise. But he wondered if any previous frightfulness had matched this one.

In that single moment as the group of passengers rose to leave the dining salon he felt a breath of hate exuding from each to all the rest. Past terrors

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had aligned men against men in mighty, evenly numbered divisions—but this put every man against every other.

He knew too well the vast potentialities of the controlling machines and logic engines, which he had helped build, to refuse acceptance of the story on the grounds of impossibility. Thousands of times the automatically controlled vats in the great chemical research centers duplicated the primal conditions of Earth's seas when sentient life first spawned in them. But for that vast process to be duplicated, a billion years of evolution compressed into months: there was the fantasy of it. In that, he could scarcely believe.

But yet he had to believe. The rumors of Syns, and the story of the CS men would not turn out now to be dreams. The Syns existed. He put away his doubts and incredulity, and with full acceptance of this thing there came that terrible fear: what had it done to Ardyth?

He spent the next hours with preliminary packing, and when he was barely through he heard his name called for the encephalograph test.

There were a dozen or so in line ahead of him. Jan Mercer was near the head of it, but she did not look back. A dull, uniform fear was in the faces of each man and woman present. It was a *personal* thing, as if each in his own heart were no longer sure of his own identity.

After the test, Arthur returned to his stateroom. Timed by the Earth zone in which they would land, he spent a night period of restlessness.

Other passengers appeared to have done likewise, for they were on the promenade deck when he went out in the morning, their eyes drab with the failure of sleep.

He saw Jan coming down the deck, and they headed for the same spot by the rail. She smiled now, and it made him remember the laughter of Ardyth. She looked more refreshed than at any time before, as if she had reached the low of her depression and had already begun the upward climb.

"It *will* be good to be home again," she said. "I should never had tried to run away, but I couldn't stand it after they took Jim—away. He was my husband—a Syn."

Arthur wished that she had prepared him for that. He wished for some preliminary remark before the sudden unveiling of that naked insight into the desolation that lay below them. It caught his breath and made his lungs ache in a moment of inexpressible pity.

Her eye lashes were wet now, and he saw that despite the smile they had scarcely dried since she last cried.

"What—happened—?" he murmured.

"What happens to all of them? Killed—slaughtered like some animal. They were wrong. Jim was human and real. I tell you there's something terribly wrong down there on Earth. They haven't found the answer yet. I don't know about the rest of the Syns, but I know my Jim was real—!"

Arthur put his arm about her shoulders to control the sudden trembling that again possessed her. His hand encountered another touch that he instinctively judged as brutal. He looked around. Captain Fairchild and another CS man were standing behind, reaching for Jan.

"We want to see you, Mrs. Mercer. Will you please come to your cabin at once?"

The girl turned. At the sight of the men she screamed once. Other passengers gathered quickly, comprehending the significance of the CS men. They closed about with predatory expectancy that relieved for the moment the pressure upon their own minds.

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Arthur felt suddenly sick and yearned to smash the nearest of those animal faces, but Fairchild's assistant was pushing them back with impatient snarls.

"Please come," repeated Fairchild, jerking at Jan's arm.

She held back and turned again to Arthur. "I told you," she murmured, and now her face seemed lighted with a great expectancy and relief.

"I told you they were wrong and hadn't found the answer—but *this* is *my* answer! This is why nothing seemed right after Jim was taken. He's been waiting for me. He knew I'd soon be coming!"

CHAPTER II

THERE WERE none of the gay crowds at the dock. It was like a landing at a ghost city of Mars, where only scattered handsful of men skulked between half abandoned buildings in nameless pursuits.

At the edge of the field, no more than a mile away, were the skeletal ruins of Old Town, the city destroyed by the War, its scars not yet erased by the new generation.

Baggage handlers moved reluctantly up to the ships. There were tiny knots of people huddled by the pillars under the roof of the pier watching anxiously as the passengers streamed from the ship through three separate ports.

At each pier gate three CS men stood in ominous guardianship. They examined the card that each passenger had to present, showing he had passed the test aboard ship, proving his humanity.

As if he might be an enemy of his own country Arthur received grim permission to pass.

"Don't lose that card, buddy," one guard said. "It's as much as your life is worth to be without one."

This ominous warning was scarcely heard, lost in the urgency with which his eyes searched the dock for Ardyth. She would be there to welcome him. But she was not a part of the tiny knot of people beside the nearest column. He ran the whole length of the pier. Within minutes, he knew that she was not present on the almost barren landing area.

Through the doors of the port building he went out to the street. At midday this looked half deserted, and its desolation was all the greater for Ardyth's absence.

She worked in a laboratory. He knew the idiosyncrasies of lab directors. Maybe she had been refused leave. But she would be off in a couple of hours. He would go to Harold and Dorothy Weaver's house, where Ardyth lived.

Because she had no family of her own, Ardyth Crane boarded with the Weavers in their own home. Arthur took a waiting cab and was soon riding through the familiar streets.

On every side was the same persistent lifelessness. It had the look of a city built for a million and inhabited by a thousand or two.

"Looks pretty bad, huh?" The driver was watching his face.

"You'd think some disease had wiped out half the population and sickened the rest," said Arthur.

"Yeah, I never seen anybody get off a ship yet that didn't wish he could get right back on and go to where he came from. If they didn't have the ban on, I'd have gone long ago and so would most everybody else."

He pulled up in front of the Weavers' and let Arthur out.

THE WEAVERS had the kind of place that Arthur and Ardyth had dreamed of owning for themselves. There was a wide, rambling white

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house set in big grounds surrounded by trees. On the grass beside the house he saw now the figure of Sally, the five-year-old Weaver, but, no—she *had* been five. She would be seven now, he thought. He wondered if she would remember.

"Hi, Sally," he called.

The child looked up with a sudden frightened glance, and then, screaming, she ran to the rear of the house.

Arthur went up to the front door and knocked. He could hear the commotion of Sally's sobbing cries inside, and then footsteps approaching the door.

"Hello, Dorothy. I'm sorry I gave Sally such a fright. She couldn't have recognized me after I've been on Cyprian for so long."

"Arthur—!"

It was not an exclamation of welcome. His smile faded as he tried to understand what was in Dorothy Weaver's voice as she spoke his name. Then he had it. Dismay.

She was a heavy, auburn-haired woman who had always had a ready laugh upon her lips, but she had changed in a kind of horrible way. She had lost much weight and her flesh seemed to have sagged without shrinking. Her face looked as if she had not smiled for a very long time.

"Arthur—" she repeated as if in a kind of daze. "I had almost forgotten— Wait just a moment and I'll call Harold."

Carefully she closed the door, leaving him standing outside. The spring wind in the trees felt suddenly cold.

If the Syn hunt had done this to gay Dorothy, what might it have done to his serious, wondering, little Ardyth? He felt a quick panic as if he had to see her that very instant. He almost turned to flee down the walk and find Ardyth where she worked, but the door opened suddenly and Harold Weaver stepped out.

"Hello, Arthur. I'm glad you're back," he said. But in his eyes there was no welcome. "You'll have to excuse Dorothy. We just weren't looking for you, that's all. We can't let you stay more than a minute, but come in and sit down for that long, anyway."

"Yeah—yeah, sure." Arthur picked up his bag and followed Harold into the house. Harold was a thin, bony man of intense energies, but that energy seemed to have been drained out of him. Of friendship there was none; yet once they had been very close.

"I'm sorry about Sally," said Arthur as they sat upon a sofa. "I didn't think I'd scare her even if I had been away so long."

"It's not that." Harold passed a hand over his forehead in a helpless gesture. "It's just all of *this*—We've told her not to speak to anyone—made her afraid to. The sight of a stranger terrifies her since—"

Suddenly he looked up with helpless terror in his eyes. He glanced from Arthur to the doorway leading to the rear of the house. Dorothy was coming in, the trembling Sally beside her.

"Dorothy—" Harold gasped. "Arthur doesn't—*can't* know—"

Then Arthur heard his own voice rising in fear. "What is it? Ardyth—has anything happened to her?"

Dorothy spoke flatly as if beyond all shock, all fear. "She's a Syn, didn't you know?"

IT WAS NOT the face of Ardyth whose image exploded in his mind. Rather, that of slim, terrified Jan Mercer when the CS men took her by the arm and she had cried, "I told you they were wrong and hadn't found the answer—"

They had taken her away to be destroyed like an animal marauder.

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"Ardyth—" His voice broke with panic. "They killed her—"

"No," said Dorothy. "She got away. When they think they're about to be discovered lots of the Syns escape. They're clever."

"But you don't believe she was a Syn!" he cried. "Not Ardyth! She was clean, and sweet—and human!"

"Be careful what you say," advised Dorothy. "They've caught a lot of them just by inference and friendship with other Syns. We've got to ask you to go now. They'll be here asking to see our cards again and submit to a special check, just because you came, because you knew Ardyth—"

He tried to find words that would bridge the gap between them. He looked to Harold, but the man only returned his glance helplessly. There was nothing left of the friends he had once known. They were drained to mere husks that bore only the names of the friends he had expected to find.

He got up, his eyes glancing slowly about the room. Here in this house he and Ardyth had known mad, happy times. Here he had made love to her and she had answered his proposal with a promise to marry him. And Harold and Dorothy had been almost as happy at the news as Arthur and Ardyth themselves.

Now Ardyth was gone—dead or worse. And the Weavers had become servants of fear.

"I'll be going," he whispered in hoarse tones that did not seem to be his own voice.

Neither of the others spoke. He moved to the door alone. Only when he opened it did they see the car outside and the men advancing towards the house. Arthur looked inquiringly at Harold. Dorothy had already rushed to the window, tearing aside the shades.

"*They're* here again. What can they want this time? Why don't they leave us alone?"

Two heavy-set men with bleak, friendless faces came into the room as Arthur held the door.

"We've had our monthly examinations and our specials!" cried Dorothy. "We've got our cards. What more do you want of us? Why don't you go away and leave us alone?"

"Take it easy, lady," said one of the CS men. "We're only doing what's necessary. You have a Sally Weaver here?"

Dorothy's face went white with shock. "Sally's our daughter. Leave her alone. Don't you touch her—"

"We have the encephalogram report of Sally Weaver. This was her first, it is indicated. The report is that Sally Weaver is not human. She must be released to us for further testing and disposal."

Harold rose now, his step like that of an old man sick with the cold of age and death's white breath.

"Sally's our daughter. You can't take our Sally—"

"Not your flesh and blood daughter. You adopted her. Is that not true?"

"Yes—yes, but she's like our own. Sally's human, we *know*. Don't you think we'd know if she were some monster?"

"No. No one knows." He looked at the spindly girl who clung behind Dorothy, her arms encircling the woman's wide hips.

The bleak face seemed to sag momentarily in lines of infinite weariness. "*We're* human, too," he said.

"Not if you take our little girl away from us!" cried Harold. "Get out of this house!"

"Be careful, please," the CS man warned. He reached for the thin arm of Sally Weaver.

Dorothy backed quickly as if

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shrinking from a cobra's thrust. The officer caught Sally's arm and dragged her away.

For the first time then, she screamed. The cry was a shriller, deeper sound than the ear could endure. A wire knife, it cut through the toughest tissues with ruthless shearing.

"Mommy—don't let them take me! What are they going to do to me, Mommy?"

The fear and terror instilled in her since the discovery of the Syns now bloomed in horrible fruitfullness.

The CS men raged at their own instincts for tenderness towards this thing that was a monster instead of a human. They jerked her roughly through the door. The slamming of it muffled her screams and gave the illusion of sudden distance as if already she were beyond human reach. And all up and down the street mothers crouched in terror by their windows, wondering if their house would be the next stop of the CS car.

Arthur became aware that the scene had passed and he had not uttered a sound. It seemed in fact as if he had witnessed only a reproduction of something that could not possibly have any connection with reality. In a moment someone would appear on the stage and sign the players off and tell him the fantasy was ended.

But Dorothy was huddled on the floor where she had fallen. Soundless sobbing shook the arch of her back. Slowly, she raised a hand and touched Arthur's knee.

"Help us, Arthur," she begged. "Help us get our Sally back. Help us find a way, please—"

CHAPTER III

HE WALKED most of the afternoon, walked the near empty streets of the city and watched the occasional faces of figures that passed with bent, contracted stride as if against a blast of winter's wind.

Eyes glanced hastily at him from these faces, shying even from this faint contact with another human being, turning away to loneliness and the security of solitude.

Where in all of heaven or hell lay the answer to this ghastly mess? he demanded fiercely of the unhearing silence of the city. Where was Ardyth—hiding in lonely terror from the merciless death that stalked her? He had to know—he had to find Ardyth if she still lived, and he'd kill the man who'd harmed her.

She was no Syn—not Ardyth of the warm lips and laughing eyes.

"We'll have a house just like Harold and Dorothy's" she'd said, "only bigger, to hold three boys and three girls. And when you become very famous you'll have to grow a long, black beard so everyone will know it, because they won't believe that a nice, simple guy like you could be such a noted scientist."

But what if she actually was a Syn? How much difference would that make? The answer was simple. As far as he was concerned, she was as human as anyone he had ever known. If she had been created by a process of evolution that paralleled man's it made little difference that it had begun in a chemical vat instead of a hot, slimy sea.

If she were a Syn, then there was no practical distinction between men and Syns. Wherever she was hiding, he'd find her, and he'd bring her back and defy the whole world to harm or reject her. If the Syns and men had no common ancestor there was no cause for their being unable to live together. There could be peace between them. There *would* be peace, he swore bitterly.

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A vow to find Ardyth was easier taken than carried out. Obviously, the murderous forces of Central Security were scouring the city for escaped Syns. If they had failed so far to find her, how could he go about it, and in secret, too, so that he would not lead them to her?

There was an answer to that.

Eddie.

At the thought of the great logic engine he felt a warmth as if at the mention of the name of an old and dear friend. And that is exactly the way it was. The machine *was* his friend, closer now, he thought, than all the human race who had turned to incomprehensible brutality in his absence, who had become willing murderers of innocent Jan and Sally, and who sought the life of the woman he loved.

Eddie would understand these things. He operated only on a basis of clear, logical truth with infallible accuracy. He did not know the erratic emotional inconsistency of human beings.

It was not strange to think of the machine as a friend. Before he went to Cyprian II, Arthur had been in charge of Eddie for a year, and he had gained more skill in manipulation of the engine than anyone else. He had been jokingly accused of building into it a dog-like sense of devotion based on olfactory principles. But his fellow technicians at Allied had long recognized that he could get more and clearer results from Eddie than anyone else could.

Arthur had told Eddie about his engagement to Ardyth. He had consulted the engine about the trip to Cyprian II, and had based his decision largely on Eddie's recommendations.

This, however, was strictly an illegal proceeding because the engine's time was so consumed by questions of world-wide import that private inquiry was strictly taboo. Everything entering the machine was recorded, and Arthur had had to lock the recorder when using only for personal reasons.

Finding Ardyth now was more than personal, he thought. Establishing peace between men and Syns was of cosmic importance. It might be difficult to convince Dr. Waldron, Allied's Scientific Director, of this, however. If so, he'd have to find some obscure way to get access to Eddie again.

While these thoughts passed through his mind, he had been walking steadily and rapidly in the direction of the plant, and now he came up before the high fence and steel gates that opened onto the grounds of the vast organization.

THE GRAY mass of the building hardly looked more inviting than the rest of the frightened and dying city. He almost dreaded to enter it for fear that all his former friends would be as Harold and Dorothy Weaver—or as Ardyth.

The receptionist was away from her desk as he entered the front door, so he encountered no one until he reached his own laboratory which he had formerly directed. He opened the door of the office which had been his own.

A white-haired man in a laboratory coat was sitting at the desk. He looked up suddenly and then his face broke into a warm and cordial smile. He advanced with outstretched hand.

"Arthur! It's wonderful to see you again. I'd forgotten your ship was in today. We'd have sent someone down—"

"That's all right. I didn't expect a welcoming committee." He pumped the man's hand with a fierce grip.

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Doc Trainer was little changed from the way he had appeared when Arthur left. The same warm humanity seemed in him instead of being drained out as with all the others.

"Sit down," he invited, "and tell me all about the horrors of Cyprian."

"They couldn't begin to match those of Earth," said Arthur flatly.

Trainer's smile died, and now Arthur was aware that Doc had not escaped, after all—

"What's it all about?" he pleaded suddenly. "It's got Ardyth. I went by Weavers' and they told me she was a Syn. I've got to find her. What crazy thing has happened to the world since I left?"

"I didn't know—I didn't know about Ardyth. I'm terribly sorry for you, Arthur."

"Tell me what is the answer to all this."

"I wish I could. I wish *someone* knew."

"This story of the Syns; it's a crazy thing! How could a chemical machine go off its base and start making artificial people? That's insane."

"It is—completely insane—and implacably true."

"Ardyth was as human as you or I, and so is little Sally Weaver, but they're going to kill her—murder that child in cold blood because of this wave of insanity that has swept the world."

His face took on astonishment, as if in this moment he comprehended anew the magnitude of tragedy. "It's like the ancient tales of Salem witchcraft, where the pointing finger of a jealous neurotic could destroy an innocent person. That's what this whole thing is—nothing more than a gigantic, world-wide witch hunt!"

Doc Trainer looked suddenly about, then crossed and closed the door leading to the outer laboratory. "The first thing you've got to learn," he said grimly, "is to stop making statements like that. In one respect this is like a witch hunt. Everywhere are prying ears of sick, jealous humans who will report such remarks as you made, and the CS will act on them, demanding your reexamination."

He shook his head sadly. "But that's as far as the similarity goes. I wish it were only a Salem witch hunt. But the Syns are real. You can ask Eddie for yourself. He is chiefly responsible for our understanding of the problem. He gave us the encephalograph test by which we uncover the Syns."

"Then why can't he tell you how and where they are made?"

"He has told us how, and we have actually duplicated the process and have made some for ourselves. So we know it can and is being done. But he can't tell us where, as you can obviously understand. He doesn't have the data and can't possibly extrapolate it any more than we can."

"I wonder," said Arthur slowly. "It seems to me that he has a good deal of the essential data—"

"You'd better go on up and see Waldron right away. He's got something pretty urgent for you. It has to do with the Syns. CS has taken Eddie over to work exclusively on it, and Waldron thinks you and Eddie may be able to work it out together."

Sudden relief flowed through Arthur. This was better than he had hoped for—being reassigned to Eddie!

"Thanks. I'll go right up."

—

DR. WALDRON was a scientific executive whose knowledge of a dozen fields was nearly encyclopediac, and whose handling of his organization was as impartial as the judg-

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ments of an engineer driving a great machine.

Arthur sometimes thought he was part of the great machine that was Allied Control, and almost looked for the invisible wiring that must connect the Director with the machines of the plant.

Dr. Waldron glanced up sharply as his secretary announced Arthur and led him in. Then he advanced and shook hands firmly, his black eyes scanning Arthur from head to foot as if judging his fitness for further use.

"That was an excellent piece of work you turned out on Cyprian," he said. "We are glad you are back, however. There's a serious project which I want to assign to you. Sit down and I'll tell you about it."

He punched the interphone buttons and leaned forward to the mike. "Please ask Mr. Benson and Mr. Trask to come in."

Benson and Trask; they were new names that meant nothing to Arthur. He felt they were of no concern to him. He didn't want to know anybody named Trask and Benson. He wished that Waldron would ask him just one personal question—how was Ardyth? When did he plan to marry her—?"

Two men entered the office while he considered these bitter opinions of Waldron. The Director introduced them.

"This is Mr. Arthur Zoran, our logic-engine specialist. Arthur, these are Mr. Trask and Mr. Benson of Central Security. You are to work with them during the course of your next assignment."

The men nodded stiff greetings while rage surged high within Arthur. He almost blurted out the turmoil of his feelings as he thought of the other CS men he had seen in recent days—their hands snatching at Jan Mercer, tearing Sally Weaver from her mother's arms—

He held back the words and returned only their greetings—with equal stiffness. Only Dr. Waldron seemed as if the world were as it should be. But his words now belied this.

"What have you heard of the Syns, Arthur?" he said.

Briefly, Arthur repeated the things he had been told, omitting the actual incidents of his previous encounters with CS.

Dr. Waldron nodded when he had finished. "You know now about as much as do any of us who have lived with and fought this thing for the past year or two.

"Allied Control has been given a top priority contract to work with CS on the solution of this thing. We've spent a good deal of time on it—mostly without results. I want you to take over the project because you and Eddie work as a team that can't be matched anywhere else in our organization. Doc Trainer can assist if you like."

"Where am I expected to begin?"

"You're on your own. Pick your lab crew to suit yourself. Call for any facilities you need, never mind the cost. You have a blank check. We ask only that you immediately report any conclusions on possible lines of action."

"We've got to know where the Syns hide out," said Trask as if this thought were the end product of vast cogitation. "And we've got to know where they have set up their reproduction centers. Those are the only two things we need to know. Give us that information, and we'll do the rest to wipe them out."

HE COULDN'T talk to these men, Arthur realized. He couldn't ask any one of them why Sally Weaver and Jan Mercer had to die. They would stare at him with horrible suspicion—and demand that he have a recheck.

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The wall between him and the other men was ever thickening and growing higher.

But inside, he felt a joyous exultation. As far as solving his own problem was concerned, they were practically offering him the whole plant.

"Is this wholly agreeable with you?" asked Dr. Waldron.

Arthur nodded. "I've seen enough since I got back to make me willing to put all my effort into such a project. The first thing I'd like is a transcript of all news items and official reports on the subject since the Syns were discovered."

Waldron nodded. "They are already available. I have them here for you. Most of the material, however, has already been put into Eddie. He can give it to you quicker than you can read it."

Arthur spent the remainder of the late afternoon locating an apartment for himself and poring over some of the news material with which he had been provided.

In the reports and editorials there was a universal flame of fanaticism and pseudo-religious zeal to promote the destruction of the Syns.

In that lay the greatest horror of all, he thought. It wasn't merely that the Syns were so much like normal humans and were being hunted and killed. It was the sudden release of world-wide blood lust and violence. Each man who reported or editorialized on the Syns seemed to have become a vessel of wrath calling for the blood of these creatures as if it were some high and sacred duty instead of a loathsome necessity.

Humanity was horrified by the events, and even while they were sick with that horror, they lusted in it. He recalled the faces of those who had gathered about Jan Mercer on the space liner when the CS men captured her. Wild dogs awaiting the kill.

He lay back on the bed, watching the twilight close over the city of despair.

How could he convince such men that there must be peace between Syns and humans?

When it was done, perhaps then the reproductive plants could be dismantled and eventually the Syns would die out and their advent be only a ghastly interval in human history.

Or—perhaps something good would come, something lasting and fine, something more than these brutal killers called humans deserved.

CHAPTER IV

HE COULDN'T sleep. The imaginative night-things of all the ages winged their shadowy way across the city and past each open window. He dreamed he saw them perching on the sill with flaming eyes and ravenous beaks. He heard the ancient witch cries from far across time, and saw the helpless witches of Salem beaten and tortured by men of his own kind, killed in bloody self-righteousness.

Then he raised up and went to the window and understood that those cries were not of fantasy and dreaming. They were real, coming from some distant nucleus of despair down in the city.

Sleep could not be won on this brink of hell. He dressed and went out into the cool night air. He took his own car, which he had recovered from storage, and drove to the silent plant of Allied Control.

It was dark now except for the occasional night light of a watchman. He rang the bell and waited during the long interval still hearing the distant cry in the city until the watchman came to let him in.

He went directly to the laboratory that housed Eddie, and turned on the

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lights. The great logic engine was a fantastic thing in the night, but to Arthur it was like an old friend on whose shoulder he could lean in complete trust.

Of them all, Eddie was the one creature in whom sanity remained. Arthur walked slowly past the long, familiar panels. Black and expressionless, they were dotted here and there with meters and inspection windows.

These hundreds of feet of paneling banked high with millions of components formed the most powerful logic engine ever built. It had personality, it had idiosyncrasies that made it an individual. There was no question whatever that it could think.

It was Eddie.

It was a far cry from the anthropomorphic automatons that had preceded Eddie's forbears in men's imagination, but it had powers greater than ever dreamed for those crude tin men.

Arthur opened the door of the control room and sat down at the operating panel. He flipped the master switch.

"Hi, Eddie," he said.

The scanning eyes in front of him seemed almost to blink with surprise, but he knew it was only the adjusting voltage being brought up to properly record his darkened skin.

"Arthur—"

The voice was a pleasant baritone. As in the case of an unseen speaker over radio or telephone, Arthur had imagined long ago the kind of person Eddie would be. He imagined a young engineer, about his own age, lean and competent, with a sense of humor matured beyond all childishness. Eddie, as he imagined him, was the kind of a person who would have been his most intimate friend in the flesh.

"Why didn't you come in sooner?" The sound came from the black core of a speaker mounted beside the eyes. "I thought you'd drop in the instant you arrived."

"I wanted to see about Ardyth first. Can't you undertand that?"

"Of course. I thought you might have found out earlier. You know now, of course, that she was found to be a Syn."

"Yes. They told me she escaped. As far as I know she is still alive and I've got to find her. Can you help me, Eddie?"

"What do you want me to do? What if she is alive and you do bring her back? She'll be killed."

"Eddie—what is the difference between a Syn and a human? Is there any at all except in the matter of parentage?"

"None. Except that the Syns may be a little more sane than your kind."

"Then why can't they live together? Waldron and the officers of Central Security want me and you to figure out how to locate and destroy both the Syns and their reproduction centers. I don't think it is necessary. I think some way could be found to declare peace between the two groups."

"Yes, they've tried for weeks to force me to extrapolate from data I don't have. They mentioned you would be in and that we would be assigned the task of seeing to the Syns' destruction.

"As for your question: You know your own people well enough to answer that. When have they ever allowed a divergent minority to live in peace? Your religious history reeks with betrayal, slaughter, holy wars, oppression of disbelievers and unorthodox believers. For four thousand years you have cried peace and unity and tried to enforce it on a community scale, but you have never understood that until each man achieves his own private tolerance that there can be no brotherly love or peace.

"The answer is 'no'—without any qualifications whatever. The Syns can

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not live among you in peace. There is no community of your people upon the whole Earth that would accept them. The most merciful thing that can be done is to carry out the eradication program already begun. Your own personal tragedy would be multiplied ten thousand times if you should ever see Ardyth again. I advise you not to search."

"You're a monster," said Arthur fervently. "You may be the greatest accumulation of brain stuff ever put together on Earth, but there's one thing that you haven't got."

"What's that?"

"Hope."

FOR A LONG time there was absolute silence from the machine. Another operator would have begun to glance aside at the myriad dials and panel lights for indications of breakdown, but Arthur knew Eddie.

He could sense the wave of impulses exploding to the farthest depths of the machine, rebounding and echoing back at the speed of light, searching through the tapes and memory pots for an understanding of the single word that Arthur had spoken.

Then Eddie answered.

"I have no hope. I understand the term only in connection with human beings, and humans characterized by hope are characterized by irrational expectancies based upon mere desire which has no correlation with probability. I see no value in the quality mentioned."

"You never will, Eddie. You'll never know what hope is because it's the thing that makes me a man, and lack of it that makes you nothing but a damned machine that can sit there and tell me to never search for the girl I love."

The machine was silent again for a long time, and then there came a sound that seemed uttered in the depths of bitterness—and Arthur knew the impression was insane even as he felt it, but he could not shake it off.

"Love, too," said Eddie, "is characterized by irrational expectancies and desires not related to probability."

Then Arthur laughed out loud. "Eddie, you're nothing but a damned old cynic. Now listen, we've got work to do. Get busy and figure me out a course of action. First, I must locate Ardyth. I have hope that Syns and humans can live together in peace. I'm going to work to that end. In order to maintain my position here, I've got to go through the motions of trying to find the Syns who have escaped and the reproduction centers they've set up.

"With those requirements, I want to know the best course of action to follow. Is that clear?"

"Clear, but hardly logical. You will fail on both counts and end up in dismissal from your position here and with a personal tragedy involving Ardyth that cannot be described in the logical terms at my disposal."

"I'll take a chance on it. Shift into high, and give me the dope."

The machine waited as if in reluctance, and this time Arthur did look at the indicator panel. The seeming hesitancy was not in accordance with the design characteristics of the machine. Reluctancy implied will and desires, which the machine certainly did not have, in spite of the human personality with which it was endowed—or which Arthur had imagined into it.

There was no indication of improper operation, however. The lights were green where they should be green and blank where blanks should be. No red appeared at all.

Then suddenly the machine resumed speaking. "The probability is very high," it said, "that you can

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find Ardyth if you contact the Syns, letting them think that you are one of them. This will involve no discrepancy because they automatically accept any who are rejected by humans. They could but do not make use of the electroencephalograph."

"How may I contact them?"

"Permit yourself to be treated as one of them. Arrange a scene with officers of Central Security in which you are pursued as a Syn, but allowed to escape. There is an underground organization of Syns of great complexity. They have scattered posts in the city through which they assist such escapes and provide refuge. Let your false pursuit extend over a wide area in those sections near Old Town, and you will be almost certain to encounter a member of the Syn underground who will give you refuge—and eventually lead you to Ardyth."

"Then what?"

"Then what? Then you will marry her and you will go on with your scheme to promote peace between the two groups. In the ensuing conflict, you will be killed."

IT WAS Arthur who paused now without speaking. The voice of the machine was suddenly not his friend, Eddie, the logic engine, but some portentous oracle of doom that he could not defy.

Eddie's statements were not one hundred percent accurate prophecies because Eddie did not have all the data, all the variables which would enter the picture as events moved on. But within the limits of his information, he was infallible.

"Run through it again, Eddie," said Arthur in a low voice. "Find another alternative."

"It won't do any good. I gave it to you the way it comes out."

"Come on. Try it."

There was a brief moment of silence, then the voice of the machine boomed. "There is no alternative. I have given you the only possibilities."

"All right," said Arthur wearily. "I'll take a chance on the variables which you don't know."

"I'll not likely be seeing you again, then," said Eddie. "Goodbye."

It was stupid, he thought, standing there saying goodbye to a machine, but he said it. "Bye, Eddie."

He got in his car and drove away from the silent plant. Through the dark streets of the city the lights of his car moved like the flash beam of some archeologist penetrating the halls of a long dead and forgotten city of ancient times.

He was a fool, he thought, to consider any other course than the infallible program that Eddie had formulated. Kill the Syns, wipe out their breeding centers.

Abandon hope of Ardyth—

Eddie couldn't lie.

But men did not live by infallibile logic. They had to live by faith and hope, which the emotionless brain of Eddie pronounced futile. If they ever abandoned those qualities they would be no more than Eddie—mere machines.

From the moment that men first suspected their giant creations of thinking ability, they had feared these brains of metal and glass and streaming electrons, feared them because giant brains like Eddie could never understand that Arthur Zoran had to find the girl he loved—and die in the attempt if that were the requirements of Eddie's unanswerable logic.

Arthur knew Eddie had given him the best possible course of action under the circumstances. He would follow it as closely as possible—and hope to avoid the bitter consequences Eddie predicted.

At dawn he was awake after brief hours of sleep. He went directly to

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the plant again and called for a conference with Trask and Benson and Waldron. There he outlined the plan Eddie had given him—omitting the restrictions he had imposed upon the logic engine. The CS officers were not impressed.

"We've tried that," said Trask scornfully. "In every one of a hundred cities we've followed and traced down Syns who have tried to escape. Some of them we even deliberately let go in order to find their hiding places, just as you propose to do. It never got us anywhere."

"Did you ever let one of your own men go in the manner Eddie suggests?"

"No. There are two reasons why that plan is foolish. In the first place, if we ever tried such a thing the mobs would kill the person before he got halfway."

"But some of the Syns do escape."

"Not often. Once you got among the Syns then, and they suspected the slightest thing wrong they'd kill you instantly. And don't think for a minute that they aren't smart enough to find out.

"It's all right with me if you want to risk your neck. We'll cooperate, but you haven't got a chance."

He should have added: That's what Eddie believes, too, Arthur thought, but he merely nodded agreement. "You make the arrangements for me to be tested negatively and provide for some means of escape. I'll do the rest."

CHAPTER V

IT WAS like a great cattle pen. A mass of dejected humanity was crowded into the ugly red stone building housing the CS test program for the city.

Arthur took his place in the long line. Far ahead of him, rough wooden seats were provided against the dirty walls, but a hundred slumped and beaten human forms intervened between him and those seats. A hundred symbols of defeat. Some sat upon the floor their legs straight out before them. Others hunkered up with heads buried against their knees. And each shifted with a grotesque wriggle of his body as the line moved a step nearer to the point where some would be freed to return to life, and others condemned to ruthless slaughter.

Those who were not sitting on the floor leaned dejectedly against the wall, sliding along it, insistent upon its support, as if they could no longer bear the weight of their own existence.

There was dirt. It was upon the walls where they had leaned and slid along. It was upon the floor where they had scuffed their feet and spat in helpless anger. And it was upon their own persons.

Cattle, Arthur thought. To each of them, who had come once a month for almost two long years, seeing each time more of their numbers consigned to slaughter, it must seem as if they would all be taken if only they came often enough. They were already condemned. It was only a matter of time until their own personal sentence was read.

There were children in the mob, too, lively little children like Sally Weaver, coming for the first time. And some of these would not leave the building this day or else would be recalled with cruel persistence as Sally had been.

He wondered what would happen if he should call for the opinion and vote of these on the question of establishing peace with the Syns. Would there be anyone of these beaten cattle who would refuse a place to the rejected ones when he, himself, might be the next to receive the thumbs

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down mark of the gods' disfavor?

He did not understand how it was that some of the Syns could pass the test month after month and be caught only after twenty or thirty testings. It was the defect in the testing procedure, Waldron had explained. Being improved constantly, the test was still far from perfect. They leaned over backwards to make sure that no real human were branded as Syns.

They had told him that a Syn knew his own nature, of course, but if this were true, Arthur could not understand why they simply came to the testing rooms time after time, gambling indefinitely on their uncertain ability to pass. Why didn't they segregate themselves to escape this slaughter?

This was not their purpose, Waldron had explained. Their purpose was to infiltrate and take over human affairs, not to segregate themselves. Besides, they were only damned machines. They had no emotion of hope or yearning for life. Destruction meant nothing to them, individually.

But always, Arthur's criterion was Ardyth.

Ardyth—a machine? Without emotion, without love of life?

Arthur cursed softly to himself. Somewhere they had over-looked some great and important truths about the nature of Syns. He didn't believe Syns actually knew their own natures.

THE MAN in front of him in line had been talking in spasmodic grunts since Arthur came in. Some of his muttering finally entered Arthur's consciousness.

"Nobody comes to buy anything anymore," the little fat man was saying. "Another month like the last one and I'll have to close up. Then what'll happen? I ask you where'll I be then, with my store closed up? These stinking Syns—I wish I could get a couple for myself."

"Are you sure that you will always be able to pass the test?" said Arthur.

The man turned slowly as if Arthur had called him a dirty name. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded. "Who're you calling a lousy Syn?"

"No one," said Arthur. "But I just wondered how it is that some of us go through and pass the test maybe nine times and on the tenth one are rejected."

"That's because the lousy Syns are so damned clever. They know how to fake their way through the test, but sooner or later they'll all be caught and then the world will get back to normal. If I could only get me a few of them before then," he finished savagely.

Arthur understood their brutality now. Each one believed that *he*, personally, could pass the test forever. But was it true?

"Don't you think it possible that we could live with them?" he said. "Do they really have to be killed?"

The man stared at Arthur as if unable to believe his senses. "You talk like one of them! If I thought you were—"

"No—I've been away for a long time. This is my first test since I got off the ship. I don't know what it's been like living with the Syns loose, but it seemed there ought to be an easier way than all this killing."

"Smashing a lousy machine that's gone mad is not killing. Damn, I'll bet you *are* one of the things, after all. You talk just like one."

By now, others had overheard the conversation, and the little fat merchant turned grinning to them. Don't he talk just like one of them? I'll bet he don't get through the test."

There was sage nodding of agreement.

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My brothers. My fellow men! Arthur thought.

A man behind him spoke with some show of kindness. "I just wouldn't talk like that if I were you, buddy. It's not safe—"

"Move along there you guys!" There came the impatient snarls of offended humanity anxious to close the gap that had appeared in the line ahead of Arthur and the merchant. Humanity anxious to have its chance to be tested for damnation, he thought.

It was nightfall when Arthur finally reached the inner sanctum. The technicians had been notified by CS of the plan, but they did not even glance at him as he entered. One of them at a desk was at the panel of a huge punched-card machine.

"Card," he demanded.

"I'm Arthur Zoran."

"Card, please!"

"Arthur Zoran of CS."

The apathetic technician looked up as if unsettled by this interruption of routine.

"Arthur Zoran—oh yes."

He turned away to confer hastily with an older man at the testing equipment. The latter straightened and approached Arthur. His smile was utterly bleak as if there could be no humor or good feeling whatever within the confines of this building.

"We are ready for you, Mr. Zoran," he said. "We hope you are successful."

HE LED the way through an adjacent door to a barren chamber. Inside, he looked about with a puzzled air. "Strange. They must have taken that other fellow out. They told me the euthanasia chamber was full. We had a Syn here just before you that gave the strongest reaction we have seen for a long time. He was manacled to this ring on the wall.

"Anyway, you are to go out that door which I have just unlocked, across the room. Follow straight down the hall. A car has been left outside. Follow the driveway on out. The guards have instructions to let you pass without question. Two minutes after you leave the grounds the alarm will be sounded in the city signifying the escape of a Syn. After that, you are on your own."

"Thank you." Arthur shook hands with the doctor and watched him disappear back into the testing room.

For an instant, Arthur stood surveying the dirty ante-room to death. Little Sally Weaver must have passed through here, and before her, countless thousands had passed this way going to the euthanasia chamber because they lacked the same kind of humanity as those who judged them.

He shook off the sick pall of fear that exuded from the very walls and approached the door that had been indicated.

He opened it cautiously. Then from out of the dimness of the poorly lit hall a squat, snarling figure hurled itself upon him. Desperate, pudgy fingers wrapped about his throat seeking to encase his neck in a strangling hold.

The assailant was hardly a match for Arthur, his body thin and wire-hard from his years on Cyprian. His own fingers twisted on one fat wrist with crushing force. The grip about his throat disappeared as his enemy twisted away with a cry of pain. Arthur spun him to the floor in a crushing fall that knocked the breath from him.

He lay there groaning and whimpering without rising. It was the blustering merchant who had stood in line all day ahead of Arthur.

Viciously, Arthur spoke. "I guess

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you were right. Syns are pretty smart, getting through the tests for months—but they finally get caught, don't they?"

"I'm not a Syn," the man blubbered. "They made a mistake somehow. I tell you I'm not a lousy Syn!"

"You'd like to get yourself a couple before this is over, would you? Well, here are a couple of pretty good ones right here—me and you."

"What are you going to do? I didn't mean to jump you. I thought it was a guard coming." The man struggled to sit up now.

ARTHUR hesitated in pity for the fear-sick creature. But how could he hamper his own flight with this one? Yet if he left the Syn the euthanasia chamber would soon be able to accommodate him.

He wondered how the Syn had broken loose. Then he saw the grotesquely twisted body of the attendant lying in a heap on the floor behind the door. The merchant must have leaped him as the careless attendant unmanacled him. A ring of manual keys were on the floor, but ordinarily the locks were opened by electrical controls which Arthur had watched the doctor operate to free this door for him.

Arthur grinned. "Most Syns must be so dispirited that they don't put up much fight or this fellow would have been more careful. You did a good job on him."

"What are we going to do?" the merchant repeated. "I couldn't make them understand that I'm not a Syn. They won't listen to me."

"Don't you think it was this way with all the others who have gone through here? Don't you think they felt the same?"

"No—they were Syns. They knew they had it coming—"

"How about me? Have I got it coming, too?"

The Syn's eyes widened in a new fear as if the thought had not occurred to him that he was putting Arthur on the other side from himself.

"It's a good joke, isn't it?" said Arthur. "I'm going to get away, and they're going to put one of their own kind in the chamber. Funny, isn't it?"

He understood fully, now. The Syns *didn't* know their own identity beforehand—and not knowing, they shared the common brutality of mankind.

"Take me with you!" The Syn whimpered. "We can find the Syn underground organization. It's big. Tell them I'm one of you and let me live with you among them!"

"You said that Syns and men could not live together."

"Please—we've got to hurry. They'll find us out here."

"But you would not give a single Syn the mercy you are grasping, would you?"

"Please!"

"All right, come on. Let's get out of here."

They went down the long passage without interference, nor did Arthur expect any. CS had prepared the way. It was when they were outside that there would be trouble.

They found the car at the end of the corridor as had been promised. "We'll take this," said Arthur.

His companion got in without speaking, his fat body trembling in every contour. His brow was beaded with perspiration.

Arthur warmed the motor for a few seconds, then gunned it heavily and snapped into the main driveway with a snarl of the wheels. Without a single glance at the guardpost, he burst through the open gates and into the street.

Then from the buildings behind them there came the long low wail of siren warnings, the dread notification

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of escaped Syns at large in the city.

Arthur wheeled the fast, heavy car through the dark and silent streets toward Old Town. From far behind came the sound of sirens on CS cars plunging in pursuit. Ahead, he saw the ruins of Old Town dimly silhouetted against the starry sky.

THE NIGHT seemed to become darker as he found the poverty ridden streets bordering Old Town. He cruised down the alleys at the rear of the ancient houses that lined them. On the car he reduced the head beams to a narrow pencil of light.

"Down there!" suddenly exclaimed his companion. He was pointing off towards the darkest, most dismal alley they had seen. "Let's try to hide down that one."

It looked as good as any to Arthur. He wheeled the car into the narrow, debris lined drive, but they could never make contact with the Syns in the car, he thought. They would have to abandon it, but how could he get rid of it without exciting the suspicions of his companion?

He took the only obvious way. As if by accident, he drove at a fast clip into the long row of weathered fencing that lined the alley. The fat Syn screamed as he saw the shattered boards flying through the air and crashing about them.

The terrible crunching died away as all sense of motion vanished. Then they heard the crackle of flames in the dry wreckage.

Arthur dragged the whimpering fat man from the broken car and stood him on his feet, slapping his face vigorously.

"Come on! They'll have the whole block surrounded in a minute."

The distant sirens were nearing, and already they had roused the sleeping neighborhood. Night terror for these people had been replaced by the hope of vengeance upon some of those responsible for their misery.

"There were sudden cries from windows on every side as they ran down the alley in the glare of the rising flames. "Syns! There they go! Don't let them get away!"

The fat Syn was soon puffing heavily, and the sound of other running feet was plainly heard behind them now. The mob was gathering, and Arthur knew he would have to abandon the fat man to them if he couldn't keep up.

They crossed the street at the end of the alley. Arthur hesitated for an instant to decide whether to turn or to continue along the alley. Blindly, the frightened Syn plunged on ahead. Arthur followed. It was as good a way as any.

He caught up quickly, cursing the stumbling steps and sobbing breath of the Syn.

"Come on, damn you," he snarled. "They'll have us like a pack of wolves if they ever catch up with us."

"What good is it?" The Syn sobbed. "Where can we go? How can we hide?"

In sudden renewal of pity, Arthur realized the hapless Syn was only fleeing blindly without goal or plan in mind. He tried to put himself in the Syn's place, running from certain death. It was impossible, because he had no such hazard: Capture that meant only another freedom for him was sure death for the Syn.

He stopped and patted the soft flabby arm of the merchant. "We'll find our way out of this, I promise you that."

He didn't stop to analyze the utter foolishness of this rash promise. He only looked frantically ahead into the darkness, hoping for the sight of a beckoning Syn who might offer them refuge and safety. From behind, the mob sounds increased.

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Abruptly, a tube of light thrust down through the darkness from far behind, bathing them in a brilliant flow of illumination. At once the cries increased to a howling fury. Arthur looked back. It was a spotlight mounted on one of the CS cars that was trying to force itself down through the mob choking the alley.

The crazy fools! They didn't have to make it so realistic, Arthur thought. In that light it would be almost impossible for a Syn emissary to reach them and lead them out of the way. He suspected Trask and Benson had given orders that punches were not to be pulled in any degree whatever.

HE RESUMED flight, dragging the despairing Syn by one arm. With a moan of anguish, the Syn jerked back, pointing to the opposite end of the alley that was now visible in the light of the CS beam.

The alley ended abruptly in a board wall.

The CS car was at the head of the mob now a scant hundred yards behind them. The officers could pick up their quarry at will. Any holding back by them would betray the purpose of this make-believe flight.

It was a stupid thing to have run into a dead end alley, but even if they hadn't done so Arthur wondered just how escape might have been possible. He felt a deep respect for those Syns who had achieved freedom in such pursuit as this. Ardyth, he thought, had succeeded.

But suppose he *were* a Syn? He wouldn't be giving up even now. He would be driving every neuron of his brain to produce an answer, a way out of this dead-end alley.

It made a difference. Self preservation instincts were active in his Syn companion even though failing Arthur.

"There's trash at the end," said the Syn. "Maybe we can scale the fence."

"Right. Let's make it to the end as fast as we can go."

They slammed their bodies into the fence and hung gasping as if impaled by the force of their momentum. Like some terrible piston thrusting along the cylinder in which they were trapped, the mob with the CS car at its head was driving down the narrow alley.

The Syn moved towards the trash pile and began struggling to the top of it in the full glare of the light. He reached for the top of a stack of crates to hoist himself up. Slowly, the pile arced back under the impetus of his weight. He screamed in panic as the pile tilted and fell, his cries becoming lost in the rumble of collapsing boxes and shattering crates.

Arthur leaped to tear the pile of material from on top of his companion. He could hear the individual cries of the mob where there had been only a mass of indistinguishable sound before.

"Don't let them get away! Kill the dirty Syns! Get behind the fence—don't let them get over it—"

"Stand still and raise your hands or we'll shoot!" This was a cry in which Arthur recognized the authority of the CS voice. But he continued his task of rousing the fallen Syn.

"Get up!" he demanded fiercely. "Get up or I'll leave you there."

He didn't know if the Syn were hurt or not; there was no chance of examination now. Then, as he straightened from shifting the debris, he noticed the thin, dark line of a gate in the high fence, a gate revealed by the collapse of the pile of debris.

The Syn stood, shaken, and looked into the glare of the lights.

"We're lost!" he moaned.

"There's a gate right here behind the trash," Arthur said. "Can't tell if it's locked or not, but let's rush it together. They'll fire as we move, but

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one of us may make it."

They moved as one man, scrambling over the pile of trash, then down behind the peak of it. Their bodies smashed into the gate. It remained, a solid immovable part of the fence.

THEIR SWIFT rush signaled the crash of bullets, thundering in the alley. Splinters whined as they twisted through the air. Arthur dragged the Syn down, hiding partly between the fence and the trash pile.

Then from somewhere that seemed almost beside them they heard a new and unbelievable sound—the answering thunder of gunfire directed towards the mob.

Arthur raised his head in careless amazement. From a narrow crack between the boards he saw another burst of fire. Then a voice snarled huskily at them. "Get down, you fools. We'll have this gate open in a minute—there. Come on through!"

There was screaming in the alley. Someone had been hit by those defending bullets. Now the mob was firing on its own. Arthur heard the cursing cries of the CS men trying to halt the angered group, threatening to fire into them. But the officers were helpless now, and Arthur understood they would not fire into the mob to save even him. They couldn't without risking their own lives. This was what Trask had warned against.

Bullets crashed close as he fell through the open gate with his Syn companion. Hands reached for them in the darkness beyond the fence. Firm hands clutched each arm and led them swiftly away towards the dark buildings nearby.

"The mob will be over that fence in a few seconds!" Arthur warned. "We've got to get away from here."

"Let us take care of that," said the stranger at his left.

They hurried into the darkest shadows as the first wave of the mob broke over the fence and crashed through the gate, choking it with their own bodies.

Then, in the half darkness of the scene, Arthur saw two shadowy figures dart away from the mob. The cries of rage funneled in their direction and swift pursuit was renewed. He understood then. Two skilled Syns were acting as decoys for himself and his companion to lead the mob away while they were guided to safety.

The four who had rescued him watched in silent satisfaction, then one turned in the darkness and spoke. "We welcome you, fellow Syns. Welcome to the brotherhood of outcast humanity!"

CHAPTER VI

IN THE distance on one hand the sounds of the mob died, and on the other the crackle of flames was subdued by the hiss of foam clouds. Silent darkness settled over the sick and weary city once again.

At the side of the building the Syns opened a cellar door leading into the depths beneath. Without lights, they moved by sense of perception only. An increasing smell of mustiness became nearly stifling. After a time they halted, the guides fumbling with some hidden door catch in the darkness.

Then, as a portal opened, the party passed through and the door slammed behind them as if with a heavy seal, shutting out all sound, engulfing them in silence that bore the illusion of utter sanctuary. The lights came on with blinding suddenness.

"Welcome to the country and possessions of the Syns."

Arthur turned to the guide who spoke. He might have been a lithe and muscular man once, but his face was bleached a sickly color now as if

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he had lived in this warren away from the sun for a long time.

They were all like that. Their faces and bodies bore the marks of hiding and living with the constant fear of pursuit and death.

"We've forgotten the names we once had," the Syn guide said, "just as we've had to forget we once were humans. Lack of identification has some precautionary features, which is the main reason for its adoption. I am known as James. These men are Clark, Wallace, and Barkley. You may introduce yourself by any term you choose, and it will be that by which you are known for the rest of your life among us."

Arthur saw no good reason for assuming a pseudonym. "I am Arthur," he said.

"Good enough, and you—?" He turned to the fat merchant who hesitated as if suddenly intrigued by the necessity of framing a mask to hide him all the rest of his days, a mask that had to be a golden, magnificent thing to counterbalance the shoddy, unbelievable fate that had befallen him.

"Laurence," he said with exaggerated motions of his mouth and lips as if savoring some delicacy. "I like Laurence. I shall be Laurence."

Even the four Syns smiled at this feeble attempt of the merchant to elevate himself with a name.

"Laurence it shall be," said James. "Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen. You will rest a day or two here. I suppose you haven't eaten—?"

There was a small and ancient freezer well stocked with food, and canned goods were stacked on shelves. Arthur wondered about their source of supplies and activities that were directed from this location. He wondered about Ardyth, and how much closer he was to her because of this step. But those questions would have to wait for later answers.

He sank down on one of the ill-kept beds and closed his eyes. He let the reaction come now, the reaction of understanding how close he had been to death in that alley trap. There was something he didn't like about that. The fact was not in the probability that Eddie had given. The logic engine had not indicated danger at this point, though Trask and Benson had warned of it.

In dismay, he suddenly recognized that if Ardyth had adopted a pseudonym somewhere in the warrens of the Syns she was still as remote as ever.

He sat up sharply.

"What happens next?" he demanded. "Where do we go from here?"

CLARK SPOKE up from beside the tiny, radiant stove, where he cooked. "Go? You don't go anywhere from here. This is the end of the world, didn't you know?"

James rose from his own bed across the room. He smiled without humor and came over to put a hand on Arthur's shoulder. On the way, he patted Clark's back affectionately.

"Don't let Clark get you down with that. We've got better plans than that, but he's only been here a couple of months. The rest of us have been here over a year—old timers."

They were young, Arthur discovered with a kind of shock. James had thick black hair that once had been well cared for. He'd been a good looking guy before this. All of them, except for their unnatural pallor, could have passed for ordinary, competent young engineers or technicians, young husbands and fathers of normal society.

"We're as human as the rest of the world," said James savagely. "Don't ever forget that. Just because they've kicked us out doesn't mean that we're

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some robot monsters. We're men! Get that into your skull and don't ever let it out. The classification as Syns changes nothing of your actual nature. You're exactly what you were before you acquired a new name. You're a man, understand?"

"No. If I'm a thing made by a machine I am not a man and never can be."

"You can go crazy—just like a man—and that's what will happen if you keep on thinking like that. Listen: We're everything that men ever were and a lot more besides. Think of that crazy, howling mob out there that nearly murdered you. Would you be glad to be one of *them?*

"Syns are more than men. We're the new inheritors of Earth. Look at the mess that men have made of Earth ever since they had it. They're born and bred and live out their miserable lives tottering on the very edge of insanity, and half of them dip over during a good part of their lives.

"The Syns can never do that. We're sane. We're whole. We're what men might have become and never did. And we'll replace men in the end, and make something of this world that they've torn up with their wars.

"You needn't be ashamed. You can be proud you are a Syn. You shall inherit the Earth!"

James' voice had risen and his jaw muscles stood out in knots at the side of his face. His eyes burned with fierce conviction.

Arthur watched him, his eyes searching the finely shaped skull, the pallid skin through which forehead veins pulsed feverishly. This was something that Arthur had not dreamed of. He had pictured the Syns as beaten dregs of life that had once passed for human. In James he seemed to be witnessing the resurrection of a man.

"How will that come about?" he said quietly. "Will we be forced to resort to the same force that you have branded as insanity in men?"

"We may. We hope not. In the end, we'll simply out-number men. Then all killing will stop. We'll give men a piece of the Earth to live on, and show them how to live if they'll listen. If they won't, we'll let them die out through lack of breeding. But whatever men do, the world belongs now to the Syns."

THE SIX of them moved to sit about the table as Clark finished setting out the food. Laurence seemed suddenly as pale as if he'd remembered some long forgotten ghost.

"My family might be sitting down to dinner now," he said in a muted voice. "They won't know about me, will they? They won't know at all—"

He looked at the circle about him, his moon face warping with grief.

"Let it come, fellow," said James quietly. "We all went through it. Lie down on the bed there if you don't feel like eating anything."

Arthur covered the awkwardness of Laurence's weeping. "How can the Syns increase their numbers under present condition? It seems more likely to me that we'll be exterminated."

"We're working night and day to find the reproduction centers," said James. "When we do we'll be able to control them and guide all new Syns to us, where they can be protected until they develop."

"You mean you don't know the locations of the machines that produced us!" exclaimed Arthur. "Are there no Syns who have memory of their connection with the machine?"

"Barkley claims a kind of recollection, but he can't be sure. None of the rest of us have any. Rather, most of us remember families and parents just like any one else. That's because the machine put those memories into

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us so that we could pass as conventional humans without betraying our origin. Everything would have gone as the machine planned if that damned logic engine hadn't discovered this one betraying feature that the encephalograph reveals."

"Haven't you been able to test these memories by contact with parents, for example, after being declared a Syn?"

"Wallace, you tell the man about that."

The black eyes of Wallace were deep in his cavernous face and roily with bitterness. "I tested it," he said. "I went back to my parents' house after I was told I was a suspected Syn. They told the CS men they had never seen me before. They threw me out to be killed without a word of recognition or sympathy."

"You can't blame those people!" exclaimed James. "It was true they had never seen you before. The machine had given you memories of parents like them so you assumed you were their son. It must have terrified them to have a total stranger walking up claiming to be their son—and a Syn, at that. They aren't to blame."

"I don't know," said Wallace wearily. "I just don't know any more. But I do know that we have to push on as if we did know all the answers. I've got to believe in the machine, and in the Syns. There's no man in whom I can believe any longer."

"We're going to locate those machines. Maybe Syns in other parts of the world have already done so. One major problem is establishing communication with such groups. We are handicapped in that, you can understand."

"Before I left Earth for Cyprian II where I spent the last couple of years," said Arthur slowly, "I was engaged to marry a girl. While I was gone, she was found a Syn and escaped. *My* first objective is to find her—if she is still alive. Here is her picture. Her name was Ardyth, if she has not changed it. Have any of you ever seen her?"

He passed the photo around the table and it came to rest in front of James. The big, tense man seemed to go a shade more pallid, and Clark gave a sudden snort.

"Know her? We haven't heard of anything else for weeks. James has the idea that she has promised to marry *him*!"

CHAPTER VII

THEY REMAINED within the warren the following day. At nightfall, James planned to take them to the Syn's central headquarters. They ate light meals, mostly from force of habit, for all hunger except that for freedom and companionship had left them.

James' attitude throughout the day was perceptibly colder, but at times he tried to make up for it with spasmodic over-demonstrations of friendliness. Arthur liked the Syn group leader in spite of his fantastic claim to Ardyth.

He was not afraid of any possible validity to that claim, but Ardyth's treatment the past year might have thrown her into such despair that she had abandoned the dreams she and Arthur had known, and had sought refuge in such love as James offered her.

He felt sorry, too, for he sensed that James' love for her was real, and his burden of bitterness would be doubled when she had to renounce him. He almost hoped their two Ardyths were not the same. But James said there was no doubt of the identity, and promised to take Arthur to her.

As evening approached, a sense of urgency and expectancy began to grow in the movements of the four Syns who understood what was ahead of

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them at this time.

"I want to show you our communication system, now," James told Arthur. "It's about time for our scheduled roll call."

He took Arthur to a small adjacent room which none of them had entered during the day. Within it was a broad table covered with a litter of crude but ingenious-looking equipment. James sat down at the chair before the table.

"The city is ringed by such posts as ours. Communication is by infrared beams. Each post is in line of sight with at least two others. These eyepieces will give you a look at the two others adjacent to us."

Arthur bent down to peer through. Along a very narrow and precarious line of sight, he saw distant, unobtrusive buildings like the one that covered their warren. One seemed about a mile away, and the other somewhat less.

"An automatic alarm rings when either line of sight is accidentally or purposely obstructed," said James. "It is our only source of communication. In just a moment our turn for roll call will come."

Even as he spoke, a small light began flashing on the table. He put on a set of phones and listened carefully, then began tapping an ancient telegraph key.

The contact finished, he laid down the phones and glanced up speculatively at Arthur. "It seems your fame has spread already. We reported your arrival in routine contact last night. The First Created has a detailed report on you and orders your appearance tonight. Special guard arrangements are being made for your safety. You must have something the First wants pretty badly."

"The First Created—who is he?" said Arthur. "You haven't mentioned him before. And how did he get such a report on me?"

James smiled. "There's a lot that I haven't mentioned, but you'll find out gradually. The First is our leader. He was the first one created by the machines, and we have him to thank for the organization and relative security that we enjoy. He was especially endowed by the creating machine with many qualities that the rest of us lack."

"But even he does not know where the machines are located?"

"No. He has assigned that to all of us as our prime goal."

During the day, James had prepared counterfeit test cards for Arthur and Laurence. These, he turned over to them now.

WHEN IT was too dark for observation without lights, but not late enough to be conspicuous, they left the warren. Arthur discovered then that the upper quarters, the house itself, were occupied by an old lady who kept "roomers". A Syn, she fronted for the warren. Similar setups camouflaged the other posts about the city.

They left in two groups of three. James and Clark went with Arthur in the first car. Many minutes later the other three departed in an entirely separate direction.

For the first time, Arthur was seeing the city as one of the ostracized. He sensed how high and how strong was the wall that separated the Syns from mankind. There was terror in it that made him want to rush out and frantically proclaim his humanity.

Then he looked askance at his companions and knew that he could never fully comprehend their feelings for they could not be moved to such a proclamation. They *knew* they were not of the substance of mankind.

In the busiest part of town Clark took the car on alone. Arthur and James went into a public restaurant and ordered a meal that offered more

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substance than the cooking in the warren, which was emergency type only.

The division of the party was perhaps necessary camouflage, Arthur thought, and their coming here was part of a desperate yearning to believe that men were once more kindly creatures who could be trusted and made friends with.

As they ate, Arthur glanced about. People talked but little or not at all. Most were alone at single tables, eyes concentrating on their food in desperate intensity as if afraid of unseen enemies who might seize them momentarily.

Suddenly the heads of the diners raised as if at news of some reprieve. Their eyes gradually lighted with bestial anticipation.

Arthur turned to the direction of their gaze. In the street a knot of people was swiftly growing to a writhing mob that blocked all traffic on street and walks. Its nucleus could not be discerned fully, but the top of a car showed in the center of the mob.

"What—?" Arthur began, and then he understood by the expression on the faces of the mob. He had to eat while murder took place before his eyes.

The diners were rising and rushing to the window in gleeful expectancy. One flabby, well dressed man stopped at their table in breathless excitement. "Come on!" he invited. "Looks like they've caught another one of those lousy Syns out there. Don't you want to watch it?"

"No thanks," said Arthur easily. "We have an appointment we must meet—have to finish up here so that we can be on our way."

James had stopped eating, his face bloodless with panic. For the first time Arthur realized how close the Syn was to cracking up. Long months of hovering death had put a thin edge to his resistance. The Syns were not the strong men they claimed, he thought. The ostracism and the constant threat of death was as heavy a burden to them as it would have been to a man.

OUTSIDE, the sound was like that at some magnificent sporting event. This was the way it must have sounded in the Colosseum of ancient Rome. This is the way it must have been while Joan of Arc burned, and while the witches of old Salem died.

He felt as if the food inside him were being loaded onto a catapult, but he warned the Syn sharply. "Start eating!"

James nodded with even greater understanding than Arthur possessed. "I've seen mobs in a mood like this grab up anyone who looked as if he disapproved in the slightest degree."

Some of the color returned to his face as if the panic had come under control. "We can slip out the side door facing the other street when we're through," he said.

Arthur tried to keep his eyes and thoughts on his food, but he kept hearing the obscene sounds from both the street and his fellow diners who crowded the windows. Then he heard the other sounds that were the cries of the attacked, the sound of human despair.

"I'm not a Syn—! Won't somebody believe me? I tell you they made a mistake—!"

James stiffened, half rising in his chair.

"Easy, you fool!"

"That voice—it's—"

"Yes, but tell me what we can do about it."

"Nothing—nothing—"

The top of the car had seemed vaguely familiar, Arthur thought. As James sank slowly to the chair again, they both imagined the three Syns out there—Barkley and Wallace, and

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frightened, fat little Laurence who had chosen a brave name to cover the fear that was in him.

Arthur wondered how on Earth they had been spotted—and if they, then why not he and James?

Breaking glass tinkled through the screams. It was a brutal miracle that on such a barren street so many rocks could be found so quickly. Then there was the sudden flash of yellow flame and the odor of burning oil.

The mob uttered its own cries of warning and backed from the billowing flames. Heat forced them even from the window and then Arthur could see his companions of those brief night hours.

Wallace was slumped over the seat of the car, his face almost beyond recognition with the work of the stoning. On the street, Laurence was huddled, his squat body like a small tent billowed out to full expanse. His head rolled back and forth while vain prayers for mercy gorged from his throat.

Barkley was still upright and fighting back. Reaching for the stones as swiftly as they came, he had already forced back a small segment of the mob with his fury.

Although the heat from the burning car had driven them far back from it, he stood as if unnoticing, and Arthur heard the awed whisper of a man by the window.

"Look at it! A man couldn't stand that, but he doesn't even notice it. You'd almost think we could have made some use of them."

"We could—if they didn't think they were as good as men. But I wouldn't want to run the risk of having a single one of them loose. When we get them cleaned out, I'll be the first to suggest lynching anyone who dares proposing that any be retained for any purpose."

"Yeah—I guess you're right."

BARKLEY had fallen now and the bulge he had driven in the mob quickly filled and curved towards him in revenge for his temporary triumph. His head was crushed and bleeding, but slowly he struggled to his feet, his face almost obliterated.

Slow curses of awe were murmured by the watchers at the window. "If men only had guts like that—"

"But it's not a man. Nothing but a damned machine. That isn't guts—it's only lack of feeling. Sure does look real, though, doesn't it? Blood and everything—"

The hand of Barkley passed slowly across the bloody face, and in that mangled contour Arthur saw—or imagined he saw—a face of deep peace that he had never seen upon a man.

More than men—James had said. Was it true? Were these the successors to mankind in their inheritance of the Earth?

The figure of Barkley collapsed suddenly before the onslaught of stones and fire, and Arthur thought of other causes that had risen Phoenix-like from martyrs' ashes. Barkley's fall was not the fall of merely a Syn. It was, perhaps, the fall of all mankind.

With leisurely disinterest, Arthur rose from the table. Together, he and James strode towards the counter. The sickness eating within James had retreated enough so that he smiled at the cashier. "Do we pay extra for the show?" he inquired.

But it was lost upon her. Already she was sinking back into the dread uncertainty of the coming night in which no man would know his neighbor, and the fearful witch-hunt would go on.

She accepted his money and they walked out as the diners who had watched by the windows returned to their cold plates. Outside, the thick vapor of oil smoke hung low in the

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street and carried with it the stench of burned flesh.

"Which way?" said Arthur.

"To the right. Clark should pick us up along the street here somewhere."

The car in which they had left the warren slid to a stop beside them almost before he was aware of it. Clark's face was haggard and wild with suspicion of pursuit.

They climbed in beside him, and he drove off with a cavalier wheeling of the car.

"Take it slower," cautioned James. "You saw back there?"

"Yes, I was almost even with them when it happened. It was horrible. Thank Heaven I'm not a human! They are monsters that ought to be wiped off the Earth. It will be easy enough for me to take part in any extermination of them."

"But you had seen the same thing before—from the other side—"

Clark nodded slowly. "Yes. Once I even laughed when I saw a Syn dying. I thought he was no more than a grotesque, mechanical thing."

"If that's the way *they* felt then perhaps we can't blame them too much."

"Oh, I don't know! How is it possible to see both sides—to have been on both of them without becoming insane?"

Clark was right, thought Arthur, and he had forgotten until now the vicious pleasure of Laurence anticipating that Arthur might be shown up as a Syn.

It made no sense. They were all swabbed with the same black brush, men and Syns—until the separation came that proved one to be a man and the other a thing of artifice.

He was sure he did not have the whole picture yet. Elements were lacking that had to be fitted in to give reason and coherency to the insane puzzle.

"How were they spotted?" James asked. "I thought we were covered perfectly."

"It was one of those things that wouldn't happen in a thousand years. The euthanasia guard Laurence slugged was passing on the street and recognized Laurence in the car. He screamed the word Syn, and that was it.

"The crowd bared their fangs and started drooling for blood. I don't see why we are almost like them before we are separated out, and why we can't do our own separating before they try us for our lives."

James ignored the question that Clark placed. Instead, he pointed ahead to the mass of buildings that rose at the end of the street.

"This is it."

ARTHUR stared ahead. The structures were those of the Exner Construction Company, interstellar engineers. It was they who had built the basic structures into which Arthur had assembled the automatic machines for the factories of the Cyprians.

"How can you meet here?" he exclaimed. "How can you keep a thing like this secret in the middle of a great plant like Exner?"

"We don't have to." James smiled with faint humor. "The entire Exner Company is the nucleus of the Syn organization."

"But I've worked with their engineers!"

"Then you have worked with Syns. Dr. Exner himself is the First Created."

"I've seen him from a distance only, but I know his men consider him a first rate genius."

"He is, and you'll soon find it out for yourself."

Clark drove the car through the

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heavy steel gates, flashing a signal at a watchman that admitted them. They came to a stop near the large, four story administration and design building.

Arthur followed his companions up the somewhat familiar stairway and corridors. He tried hastily to recall what he knew of Dr. Exner. The man had once worked for Allied. He had worked on the design of Eddie during the first planning of the logic engine, and he had been called in for work and consultation during the time Arthur was on Cyprian.

Exner had always remained uncommunicative and reserved. He made few friends among the staff at Allied, but no one ever doubted his ability or his genius.

For Arthur, however, it was utterly impossible to imagine him in the position of Syn leadership, for him to be the mystic so-called First Created.

James stopped abruptly before a broad door of grandly polished wood. He pressed a small case against an unobtrusive panel near the center of it. The door swung inward, and they were in the presence of Dr. Exner, First Created of all the Syns.

CHAPTER VIII

HE WAS looking up at them from behind the massive desk that was covered with a few neatly arranged papers. He had the same unhealthy pallor that Arthur had come to think as the hallmark of the Syns. It was almost a grayish tinge that matched the close-cropped hair. The lines of his bullet-shaped head were revealed with unattractive clarity, and the grayness of his hair seemed distinguishable from the grayness of his face only by the textural quality of each.

"I am happy to see you, Arthur Zoran," he said slowly. "I had long hoped that your return to Earth would find you in our midst. The Syns have great need of your talents.

"You have done very well, James and Clark. Please leave us now, and I will continue the instructions you have so well begun."

The shadow of hostility, absent the past hours, fell again over the face of James, but his smile belied it. "I'll be seeing you," he said. He left with Clark in tow.

"Sit down, please," said Dr. Exner. "I am sure that James has answered many of your preliminary questions, but if there is anything in particular that you want to know I'll try to answer it for you."

"There's only one thing I want to know: The whereabouts of my fiancee, Ardyth Crane. James claims to know her—that she has promised to marry him. I want to see her."

"There is an Ardyth here—one of our most excellent and valued workers."

Arthur flashed the small plastic picture across the desk. Dr. Exner glanced at it briefly and nodded. "She is the one of whom James spoke. I will take you to her as soon as we are through here."

Take me to her, now, you damned old fool! Arthur thought fiercely.

But there was no way on Earth to force the impassive mask that faced him across the desk. The whites of Exner's eyes seemed curiously large and alive almost as if with a light of their own. It gave his whole face an expression of high, fanatic purpose, in which the destiny of any human—or any Syn—was of small consequence.

He was silent for a long moment and then he began speaking in a voice so low that for a moment Arthur wondered if he had missed the first words.

"We are the future race of man-

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kind," said Exner. "We are the super race of which idealists have dreamed down through the ages. The destiny of Earth is in our hands."

"But we have to find first who made us, and how," said Arthur. "That is what James told me."

"He is correct. That is our immediate goal, and I think you will be able to help us find the answer—you and our mutual friend, Eddie."

"Eddie!"

"Yes. I think Eddie knows where the machines are."

Arthur thought swiftly back to that night when Eddie had denied such knowledge. Almost he forgot his double role to blurt out the fact of his previous questioning of Eddie and the denial.

"You will be interested—and perhaps amazed—to learn how I first came to know of our inheritance," said Exner. "The logic engine was directly responsible for it."

"How was that possible?"

"It was when I first planned the organization of my own company. I was nearing the end of my contract with Allied and wanted to get an engine analysis on my plans. Since this was forbidden, of course, I secretly used the machine one night on the pretense of necessary repairs to it.

"During the course of feeding in my personal data, the question of time came up, time which might be available to me to build up the kind of organization I envisioned. As I proceeded I kept getting the most absurd answers with respect to time. Finally, I put the question directly as to why such answers were given. Eddie replied that they were not meaningless and asked if I did not know that I was virtually immortal—that I had at least ten life spans in which I might plan and proceed with my work."

"The Syns have such a life span?" Arthur exclaimed.

DR. EXNER nodded as if trying to convey the magnitude of that discovery as he had felt it on that night.

"Then the engine almost expressed amazement that I had not deduced the logical fact of my artificial creation from the factors I had given it. Eddie went on to describe in great detail how Syns originate in one of the automatic chemical research plants in exactly the same way that all life originated in the primal chemical vat of the sea."

"It's an almost impossible thing to believe," said Arthur. "Is there no other evidence except the story of the logic engine? Couldn't he tell more of this plant that did the work? And how can we be sure he did not withhold something of importance?"

"You're an engineer on logic engines. You know the safeguards against error. Besides, I put the data into him again and again. All through the night I checked and got the same answers.

"But in one respect I believe you are correct in your questioning. I think information has been held back—but only because the question has not been properly asked by one capable of understanding the answer. You are the one I consider able to ask the question and receive that answer."

"I don't know—perhaps—"

Arthur was imagining such a night as Dr. Exner had known. He felt a sympathy for the lonely man who had been the first to suddenly learn he was not of human kind.

"What did you do when you found this out?" he asked.

"What would any ordinary man have done? I expected to get married soon. How could I—a thing that was not even a man? I made careful checks. The memory that I had was one implanted by the machine. Nothing of the things I remembered could

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be checked with reality very closely. Parents were dead in the War, of course. I told the girl I was to marry that I could not go through with it. I broke her heart as well as my own.

"Then gradually I began to see the import of the knowledge I had been given. It was something that went far beyond my own petty welfare. It concerned the whole world of men and Syns. for I was the only one of either who knew of the existence of a division between them."

"Didn't Eddie reveal the knowledge to others?"

"I cautioned against it, and introduced factors into the circuits to prevent it, but I knew that they would be removed sooner or later. There was no logic in my desired suppression, so I knew that it would eventually come out. I was hardly prepared for the way in which it was revealed."

"How was that?"

"You should know, first. what I did to prepare the way for other Syns. Eddie gave the electroencephalograph test to me and I used it to build up this company of Syns. Not one of us had an inkling of our identity before the test revealed it. I made the tests during occupational interviews.

"The War wiped out most family connections of the present generation so that, in general, family remembrances were impossible to check. In some instances there was conflicting information. Parents seemed to have a definite knowledge of the birth of their child, who was a Syn. Some of this data has not yet been adequately accounted for, chiefly because all our work has had to be concealed.

"We were a bewildered, half embittered lot, aware of our own bastard inheritance and not knowing exactly what to do with it. We laid plans to find the centers of reproduction that had turned us into the stream of humanity to take the part of men. This remains our greatest task.

"Then, overnight, everything changed for us. Eddie revealed to an Allied technician while you were gone that he was also a Syn and explained the significance, evidently in response to forbidden questioning of the kind I had done. The knowledge broke the mind of the creature, and when he was examined the whole story got out. Then the horror of extermination began.

"We quickly prepared counterfeit defenses for ourselves. We learned to modify our brain waves to pass the tests, but we could do nothing except watch while thousands of our fellow Syns were slaughtered. We had no way of locating them *first*.

"But along with horror came a purpose to our existence. We saw the many ways in which we are superior to men. We watched the insanity of the witch hunt spread to the whole world, and we understood our destiny.

"We are ready now to take what is our own. And do not believe that we come with a gospel of peace. Ours is as bloody as men's. The post you were taken to was no mere warren. It is an arsenal, a fort. A score of them ring the entire city, and they mount weapons whose force can make it all ours within short hours. Ten thousand trained Syns wait night and day for my command to take what is rightfully ours.

"I want no peace. I want Syns to hate humans forever, and someday there will be no humans at all, and Syns shall inherit the Earth and make of it the garden it was meant to be. And you—you shall help us, though your miserable, short life will hardly make it possible for you to take part in the enjoyment of our paradise!"

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DR. EXNER'S face split abruptly in a thin smile of inexplicable intent. Arthur leaned forward as if by close scrutiny he could read the hidden meaning momentarily revealed.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Exner's face relapsed quickly into a gray mask again. The overhead lights cast a curtain of shadow over his cheeks and his eyes were like great pools of porcelain through which the tiny pupils looked with omniscient glare.

"I mean," he said, "that your little play has fooled no one. You had not a chance in the world of making your way into our organization by playing that you were a Syn. You were watched and led along the entire way."

Arthur felt as if the base of his tongue were suddenly swollen too large for his throat. His words seemed harsh as they came from his dry mouth.

"I don't understand—I don't understand what you mean—"

"Of course you do! We are not fools. Do you think we could have existed this long if we had no better safeguards against intrusion than you have supposed?

"We know that you are a human. We know that you came to spy on us, hoping to determine the source of our reproduction in order to destroy us. We know that is your job."

"How do you know that?"

"Trask and Benson gave us the first word that you were coming. They are both Syns. So, likewise, is the doctor at the examination center who passed you through. As you may guess, he frees the most valuable of the Syns and sends as many humans to their deaths. We like the irony of that.

"And then your little companion, Laurence, was placed to spot you and lead you. Do you understand?"

With shameful hindsight, Arthur recalled now the offhand way the fat merchant had suggested the alley down which they should go, how he had been the one to reveal the gate in the fence by tearing down the trash pile—

"If all this supposition is true, what happens next? You didn't let me come here just to be killed. That much is obvious."

"No. We let you come—we wanted you to come—because we need you. We planned to obtain your help in any manner possible, but Eddie solved that problem very nicely by sending you to us.

"We need access to the logic engine. You are our only contact that is competent to handle it. Doc Trainer is also one of us, and we had high hopes when he was appointed to fill your place, but he has failed to get the information we need.

"Then I proposed this plan. You will be sent back to Allied, reporting tentative failure, but will keep on trying to accomplish your original purpose. You will report to *us* through the CS men, what you learn of our origin from Eddie. Trask and Benson, incidentally, will shoot without warning if you attempt betrayal. They are authorized as CS humans to kill on their own initiative, and it would cause little concern in these days of nervous minds and quick killing."

"Why did you go through all the shadow play of my coming here through my own plan? Why wasn't I simply kidnapped?"

"That would have destroyed much of your usefulness. As it is, you have a legitimate relationship with both our group and your own. You will proceed to find the answer—just as both groups desire. But you will report only to us!"

"And what makes you think I will

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do all this quite willingly, and without, perhaps, selecting my own death as the alternative?"

"Why?" Dr. Exner suddenly assumed an astounded expression. "Have I underestimated your talents after all?"

"I am asking," Arthur repeated evenly.

"We have Ardyth! You will do anything we ask as long as she is in our hands."

"She is a Syn, you told me," Arthur replied. He tried to keep his voice from registering the blow that Exner had delivered.

"So she is," Exner chuckled. "A Syn, a composition of inert atoms put together by a purposeless machine. She is nothing but a machine herself, just like the rest of us. I could destroy her, molecule by molecule, and listen to her screams until she died, and it would mean nothing whatever for I am also a Syn and I know that the thing that you humans call emotion has no existence or meaning for us.

"But you—you are a man, and you love Ardyth. No rationalization of which your mind is capable will ever convince you she is a mechanical creation, an emotionless thing of mere chemicals that possessed no soul. No, as long as you live, and she exists, she will be Ardyth, the girl you love, and you will not do anything at all that might result in harm to her. Is that not so?"

"You devil—you inhuman devil!" Arthur murmured through pale lips.

Dr. Exner laughed uproariously. "You see? I *am* right!"

CHAPTER IX

HE SAW Ardyth through the open door of a small room that looked out upon the broad expanse of the Exner property. She was sitting at a desk, and the light beside her made a golden cloud of her hair.

Dr. Exner urged him forward with a touch on his arm. "Go on in. She objected strongly to my plan, but she knows you're coming."

Arthur strode in, slamming the door behind him.

Ardyth whirled, startled. For a moment, all motion of her body seemed arrested in pure fluid grace while her mind recorded the image of Arthur standing against the closed doorway.

He thought if he lived to ten times the age of a Syn he would never forget her as she sat there, half turned towards him, her eyes alight with sudden, inexpressible joy. For that one brief moment all the horror he had seen and heard disappeared from his mind. Everything was just as it had been once long ago—before he went to Cyprian, and the Syn horror came into the world.

And as long as he lived he would be certain of one thing: Ardyth was as human as any woman that had ever lived. She was real.

She was his.

That quick moment of surprise and joy vanished. The light in her eyes was masked with futility and hopelessness beyond understanding. Her lips trembled and made a ragged edge of grief.

"Arthur—Arthur, my darling, why did you come here? Why did you ever come back to this sick world? No—don't touch me. I can never be touched by your kind again."

He stopped his abrupt advance towards her. "Ardyth—I've come for you. I don't know how, but in some way I'll find a means to take you out of here. Nothing has changed. I love you. You're the same girl who promised to marry me. I won't let you go."

Her small figure crumpled and her head bowed against her arms as they lay over the back of the chair. Her quiet sobbing shook the gentle arch

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of her back.

He advanced slowly and placed his hand upon her shoulder, then seized her tightly with both hands as if to still the sobbing by sheer force.

He turned her, half lifting her from the chair, and kissed her lips and her cheeks where tears made ragged paths. She seemed limp in his arms as if strength had gone out of her, but she answered his kisses softly and tenderly and murmured his name.

"Arthur—oh, darling, I wish you had never come back."

"It's going to be all right, Ardyth. Everything's going to be all right."

She wriggled free, wiping the tears from her eyes and cheeks and turned away towards the window, from which she could see the city. He followed her and put his arms about her waist.

"Someday there'll be lights all over down there, in every house, just like there used to be, and you and I will have the one we dreamed about when I asked you to marry me that night at Dorothy and Harold's place. Remember?"

"Dorothy and Harold—did you see them? It's been so long— How is little Sally?"

He felt as if icy, unbearable chill had suddenly swept the room.

"Sally—"

"Has anything happened to little Sally?" Ardyth demanded.

"The CS—they took her away the very day I arrived."

THE COLD seemed now to penetrate every cell of Ardyth's being. She was stiff in his arms as if no tenderness could ever render her pliant again. She pushed his arms from her waist.

"Sally," she murmured. "They killed little Sally—"

She looked far away out over the city as if it were something utterly trivial now and unimportant to the dream that she was seeing.

"We're Syns, Sally and I," she said. "They killed her because of it. They'd kill me if they could. *Your* kind." She turned in fury. "Your kind would kill me! I saw them coming through the streets for me with their big black car—you don't know what that's like, do you? You don't know what it's suddenly like to know that you aren't a human as you've always believed, that you're only a thing of rotten stinking chemicals put together by some machine.

"But even that doesn't mean that we don't think or can't feel. We've got every sense of emotion and feeling that a human has in spite of what Exner says. He has it, too, but he likes to play the cold machine."

"You are no different than I," said Arthur. "Humans, too, are nothing but a mass of stinking chemicals put together in a dark blind vat called a womb. There is no difference at all, just a variation in origin.

"And there can be peace between our kind. That is the thing that I have come for—to offer peace. There must be peace before this senseless destruction wipes out both men and Syns alike.

"If Syns are patterned after men, where is the barrier to peace? Where is the barrier to the love of which you and I dreamed, darling?"

The arrogance dropped away and left her a lost, crying little girl, but she drew from his approach, her face buried in her hands.

"Peace!" she cried. "There can be no such thing until the Syns are dominant. Men would never let us live in peace. You know that.

"Don't come near me. Don't touch me again, Arthur. Nothing can break the barrier between us. I have my life work ahead of me in helping to provide for the welfare of my—people. I

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will find love among them—I *have* found love. The dreams I had with you were only that—dreams that can never come true.

"You're in danger here. I know how you came and why you were brought. Help us, as they ask, Arthur. My people need your help. We've got to end the slaughter that is cursing the Earth. Help us in that, and you will be rewarded."

He moved to her with one stride and forced her arm behind her back while he cupped her chin fiercely in his other hand and held her face close to his.

"Look at me, Ardyth! Tell me if you are any different than I. Let me tell you what they have done: They wanted me because I could make Eddie tell them where the reproduction centers are. But there was only one way—through you.

"They lied to you, darling. You're not a Syn. Perhaps they can live a thousand years as they have said, but your pretty head will be dust long before then. You're human, just as I am, and they lied to you to bring me here. Do you understand that? You're human. You've been living under the burden of this lie long enough. We've got to play along with Exner, but we'll find the way out. Believe me, darling, I'm sure of what I'm talking about."

He *was* sure, he thought fiercely. It was utterly clear what they had done to get him here, what they had done to Ardyth to provide a decoy for him.

But she did not believe. She backed away in terror as he released her. "Don't say a thing like that! Don't you understand how much I want to believe it? But it's not true. I am a Syn. My people are the Syns, and I can never belong to your kind again.

"Please go, Arthur. Leave me alone. You have no right to torture me this way. If you love me, then go—and forget me. You really must."

With sickening realization, he understood the terrible grip this thing had taken on her mind. Her soul was beyond his reach. As if she took some fierce pride in belonging now to the Syns, she would not renounce them or entertain a single suspicion that she was not one of them.

"Ardyth—"

Behind him, the door opened suddenly, and Dr. Exner stood in the way. "I want you now, Mr. Zoran."

Arthur turned, leaving Ardyth in silent despair by the window. He followed Exner from the room. There was nothing else he could do.

CHAPTER X

HE WAS taken by James that same night to a public center and there they parted. Little was spoken between them during the ride, and neither had mentioned the name of Ardyth. But now, as they stood at parting, James took Arthur's hand.

"Sometimes I wish that things weren't—quite as they are," he said cryptically. "It's been good knowing you. I may not see you again, the way things are these days."

He relaxed his hand, but Arthur held it. "James—there's Ardyth—"

"Yes?"

"Don't let anything happen to her."

"She'll be all right. I'll see to that."

"I'm coming back for her. I'll kill you if you let anything happen to her."

"She'll be all right, but you'll have a fight on your hands if that's what you come back for." He lowered his hand then, and his face sobered. "But by then the whole world may blow up in our faces. I'm sick of the killing—"

"We'll stop it."

He watched James disappear into the crowd. Then he turned away in the opposite direction.

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"Check your card, buddy?"

A CS officer stood beside him. He drew out the counterfeit card the Syns had given him. The officer nodded and he passed on, unnoticed in the moving crowd.

He hurried as swiftly as possible to find a waiting cab. He was lucky to spot one just discharging a fare. He jumped in and ordered to be taken to the Allied plant.

Every minute that was wasted now was an unnecessary minute of peril for Ardyth. What they would do with her when she was needed no longer for leverage over him, he did not know.

At the plant gate, he was recognized by the watchman, who handed him a message. It was from Trask. The Syn spies had been notified of his coming. His best card was already lost, for he had hoped for a few hours of freedom in the laboratory alone with Eddie. Now, everything he did would have to be under the eyes of the Syns.

They were waiting for him in the logic engine laboratory when he got there. As he opened the door, he felt a sense of shock at the presence of Doc Trainer, whose kindly, pedagogical attitude now seemed frozen.

"You kept us waiting," said Doc quietly. "You must learn not to do that."

It was another incredible inversion of the world as he knew it—kindly Doc Trainer a vicious, bitter Syn. A man who was once his mentor and kindest friend now his enemy.

"Eddie is waiting for you."

ARTHUR sat down at his old desk and watched the three men, the scientist and the officers. He wondered what thoughts passed through their brains; he wondered if man could ever know the thoughts of Syns.

"Do you and I have to be enemies, Doc?" he said suddenly. "Is it hopeless, that idea of peace that I mentioned?"

Doc slowly nodded. "Entirely hopeless. It is a beautiful dream, but men have never granted equality of rights to those whom they did not understand. Men and Syns can live together—only after Syns obtain dominance that will assure their safety. We'll be kind to men, far kinder than they have been to us, but until we have the victory, there must be war between you and me."

Arthur shook his head. "I think you're all crazy. What do you expect me to do to Eddie? Hit him over the rectifier bank and make him talk?"

"You know very well what we expect. Your skill with the logic engine is no myth. It is a very personal thing, and well known. I advise you to get busy. Exner is not patient."

"All right. I will. But you can turn Eddie off. I won't be using him tonight. And I'm not doing any work until I get some sleep.

"I want Ardyth safe, and I'll play this straight. You can tell Waldron I'm working it from the human angle—unless he's one of you, too—"

"No, he's not. He is one of the most dangerous men we have to contend with. You will have to watch yourself carefully in front of him. But if you don't intend to work with Eddie, what are you planning to do? We expect you to try to trick us, so be warned that we have no more mercy for men than they have had for Syns."

"I will not try to trick you. I said I'd play it straight. Get that into your heads. Now I'm going home and get some sleep. When I get back here in the morning I want a large sample of electroencephalographs of both men and Syns who have gone through the testing centers. I want also some of the earliest records obtainable. I want the individual, human or Syn,

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who is the best encephalograph expert in the country to consult with me. I want testing equipment of the kind used in the centers and I want both men and Syns for sample testing. You and I will be good enough for that, if you want to take part.

"Now, see that those items are here waiting for me in the morning, and I promise to have definite results for you within a few days. Good night—gentlemen!"

HE TOOK a sedative to insure sleep, because he begrudged each moment away from the problem, now. He felt the answer was within close reach. It was urgent that he find it before Exner gave out his crazed command for the Syns to rise against the city. The present bloodshed would be trivial compared with the carnage that would follow such an attack.

He slept quietly and heavily under the stiff dose of sedative. The sun was already high when he awoke.

Driving again to the plant, he saw the Syn guard, but he ignored them. He felt refreshed and renewed for the day's task of working under the eyes of Syns and humans—and deceiving both.

Doc was in his office with Trask and Benson almost as if they had not left since the night before. His orders had been filled. A huge stack of encephalograph files was piled high on the desk, and a brain wave machine was set up in a corner of the laboratory.

And a stranger was present.

Doc spoke. "Arthur, I want you to meet Dr. Myers, specialist in electroencephalograph work. This is Mr. Zoran who requested your assistance in the project which we have undertaken to assist CS in solving the problem of locating the Syn reproducers."

"How do you do?" The man's voice held delicately precise enunciation. He was a small, bearded individual with dark hair and eyes. Arthur looked questioningly at Doc, but there was no response. He assumed Dr. Myers was a human.

"I am interested in knowing why Syns can pass the brain wave tests so many times before they are finally caught," said Arthur. "Why aren't the tests consistent?"

Dr. Myers shook his head despairingly. "You could hardly have picked a more difficult question. We do not know the answer."

"I want to learn, at least, something about these tests. I have to understand them in order to go on with my work."

"Of course. If you will step over here I will endeavor to explain the differences between Syn and normal brain waves, and how we identify them."

Syns looking on, Arthur gave himself over to Dr. Myers' long and beautifully detailed explanations. With only a key question now and then, the brain specialist built up a brilliant picture of the brain wave analysis, so that Arthur felt he understood all that the Doctor knew of it at the end of a three hour session.

The key to the whole problem was there, he thought. If he could probe on back to the first Syn graph obtainable—show that it was far older than Exner's discovery of himself as a Syn— Six years would be enough for that.

"You had to build a new type encephalograph to perform these tests for the Syns, I understand," he said. "A more sensitive type than existed before."

"Yes. The test and criteria as outlined by the logic engine were valid, but we lacked the instrumentation at

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the time to put it into effect."

"Therefore, you don't actually know who might have been the first Syn or where he existed?"

"What do you mean?"

"There might have been Syns by the thousands before the logic engine revealed their existence. They might have lived and died wholly normal lives with neither men nor themselves aware of their nature."

Dr. Myers nodded slowly. "Yes, it seems possible. I see what you mean, but it is quite obvious that there is no way to prove it. You have in mind to show that men and Syns have possibly lived in harmony—through ignorance of their differences?"

"Yes, isn't that a permissible and highly desirable hypothesis?"

The Doctor smiled wanly. "Highly desirable, if it could only be proved. Could not the logic engine answer that?"

"It has already given an answer—of a kind. I doubt the validity of it, however. I think the machine lacks sufficient data. We'll put the question to it later, again. Perhaps we'd better continue after lunch. This means a full afternoon of work."

IT SEEMED wholly a matter of instrument sensitivity. The Syns exhibited a very weak, high frequency brain wave not possessed by normals. If the electroencephalograph were sufficiently sensitive it could pick up these waves. Otherwise, they did not appear in the record of the normal, lower frequency ones.

Arthur scanned the hundreds of charts that Dr. Myers had brought. "These waves are subject to mathematical analysis," he said. "Any recurrent wave of the general, normal type shown here can be analyzed for its components. I believe that the Syn characteristic can be found in graphs taken with the old machines. Will you allow me to check some samples? Select a few that are older than the present analysis. Say, ten years. Bring also some of the very early ones."

Dr. Myers' air of precise composure vanished as he caught the significance of Arthur's intent. "If you could accomplish that—"

"Let's try. We'll take them over to math analysis."

Doc Trainer accompanied them, ostensibly as an interested scientific observer. To him, the proposed analysis made no sense in leading towards the goal that Exner demanded. His dark glance was warning to Arthur, but the latter ignored it as they came into the math room where g i a n t brains pondered exquisite problems of space and time and moving particles.

Arthur obtained a machine from one of the technicians. He put the brain wave graph into it. A narrow slit of light lay across the wave as he pressed the start button, and the sheet began to move slowly under the light.

At a distance, on the other end of the machine, a half dozen styluses began drawing as many wavy lines which represented the components of the complex graph of the brain function.

As the analysis came out, Myers looked questioningly at Arthur and shook his head. "Nothing there looks like a Syn wave."

"We'll try again."

The second chart was equally negative. Arthur began to wonder if his hunch were simply going to play out, although he knew it would take hundreds of failures to prove him wrong.

Then, abruptly, Dr. Myers gave a

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sharp, undignified snort of amazement. "That one! A Syn wave! It couldn't be anything else—I've seen too many of them—"

Arthur scanned closely. Among the slower, more leisurely curves a rapid pulsation of scant amplitude was drawn. Though he was not the expert that Myers was, it looked like the Syn waves he had seen before.

"This is wonderful!" exclaimed Dr. Myers. "Why hasn't this been done before? This changes our whole picture of the Syn-human question."

"Just one more series of tests now," said Arthur. "I want the oldest graphs you have. We'll check them the same way."

"These go back more than a hundred years. Are you sure you want to go back that far?"

"The farther, the better."

Those records were much cruder than even the immediate, pre-Syn ones, and sheet after sheet passed through the analyzer with wholly negative results.

Then, on the eighteenth examination of the ancient records, Dr. Myers straightened from his close appraisal. "There it is. A Syn record—and that graph was made just *ninety-seven years ago!*"

THIS WAS IT, thought Arthur. This was the answer. Syns had been in existence for an indefinitely long time. And Eddie had withheld that information from everyone. He had actually lied to Dr. Exner in allowing him to believe he was the first Syn.

Eddie had lied—

It was incomprehensible. Tens of thousands of guard circuits were built into the logic engine to prevent such error, and in spite of them Eddie had lied.

He had let Exner believe he was the First Created, when Syns had been in existence far longer than any chemical research plant capable of making them. Eddie knew these facts very well.

He knew where the Syns came from, Arthur thought bitterly. Eddie knew, and he had perpetrated this lie to keep them from knowing. He had sent them all on a wild search for a fantastic machine that never existed.

Arthur turned to the watching Doc, who stood behind them with bleak countenance. "You heard, Doc?"

"I heard—go on and tell me what it means."

"You wouldn't believe it from me—but Eddie will give you the answer we've all looked for. Do you want to witness this, Dr. Myers?"

"I certainly do."

They returned to the logic-engine laboratory and dismissed the technicians on duty. Within the glass-enclosed control cubicle, Arthur sat at the control desk and faced the scanning tubes. He switched on the power.

"Hello, Eddie," he said. "I'm back."

"Hello, Arthur."

"It didn't turn out the way you said, Eddie. I'm not dead, and I have no intention of becoming that way. You missed badly."

"I think not. The event sequence is far from complete. Though you have progressed safely this far, you cannot retreat; you have to go all the way. And my prognostication still holds."

"I have some new data that may change that. I want you to evaluate the material, and then I'm going to ask a few more questions about the Syns. I think you'll be able to answer them this time."

Swiftly, he placed the evidence beneath a scanner that fed the in-

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formation into the massive banks of the logic engine. There was silence in the room as the eidetic eyes recorded the information.

When it was over, Arthur spoke softly. "You will note the date of that information. That's important, Eddie, but I think you were aware of the implications even before this. Why did you lie about the origin of the Syns?"

The machine was silent for a long time. Nervously, Arthur glanced at the indicator panel. A trio of lights were burning red, like bright eyes of warning. He flicked the reset button and they returned to green and held.

"I want to know the significance of the new data. I want to know where the Syns come from. You can tell me, Eddie. You have all the information, now."

"No—no, Arthur. The information is not complete. I can't tell you—" The voice broke off in a confused sound of unintelligible gurblings. The indicator flashed red from a dozen flaming points.

"Hold the reset button, Doc," Arthur demanded. "I'll put up the clearance voltage a notch."

"You'll burn out the whole bank of memory pots!" Doc Trainer protested. "If you wreck the machine it will take months to get the same information back into it."

"I know what I'm doing—do as I say if you want this information."

DOC HESITATED, his eyes boring into Arthur's, trying to fathom the purposes behind the engineer's impassive face. "It would be very bad if the logic machine were destroyed so that it could not be used for a long time," he said with ominous meaning for Arthur alone. "It would be very bad for all of us—"

Arthur made no answer. He stood as if waiting for Doc's response. Abruptly, the latter abandoned the silent battle and stepped to the board.

The red warning lights went out as he held down the reset button. Arthur advanced a dial. From the speaker that was the voice of the engine there came a low, intense hum through which surged guttural sounds.

"Come on, damn you, Eddie! Answer my question—" Arthur snarled at the engine as if it were some living thing, a personal enemy.

But Eddie was not his enemy. Steel and copper and glass though he was, the logic engine was a thing of personality, a creature that could think like a man—the closest friend Arthur had ever known.

Arthur knew his forcing was exquisite physical torture that Eddie could not resist. In his mind, Arthur could not put down the image of his friend slowly bending and breaking upon a rack of ancient torture.

"Tell me, Eddie—"

Then the answer came clear through the guttural noise. Clear and defiant. "No, Arthur. I won't give you the answer. I'll never give it to you—"

CHAPTER XI

ARTHUR'S hand flashed down, cutting the power switch to the entire machine. The mechanical voice died and the lights on the panels went out.

Doc Trainer turned in bewilderment. "What did you do that for?"

"Another few seconds *would* have destroyed the engine. I don't want that any more than you do, but to get the answer we'll have to kill Eddie. Something has happened inside him that we may never fully understand. Did you ever hear an engine *refuse* a response?"

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Doc's face seemed pale as if he had suddenly glimpsed some vast pattern of which he was an infinitesimal part,—and whose entirety was wholly beyond his comprehension now.

"No—no, I never heard of such a thing. It'll take weeks to find trouble of such magnitude. A logic engine *can't* refuse—"

"Eddie knows the answer," Arthur insisted. "He knows as he exists now. We can obtain it by forcing with the clearance voltage. If we search for trouble and clear it, however, we shall destroy that answer without ever learning it.

"We have these alternatives: Clear the erroneous circuits in Eddie and sacrifice the information we want—or force the answer at the expense of this three-quarter-of-a-billion-dollar engine. Do we want the answer?"

Doc's face was white now, but he did not doubt Arthur's words. There was something *personal* between Arthur and the logic engine, he knew. It baffled and frustrated him, and he knew he had to trust it.

"We want the answer at any cost," he said evenly. "Can we get it now, or are there preliminaries?"

"There are preliminaries. Since the information will be given only once, there must be responsible individuals to hear Eddie's answer personally."

"What do you mean?" Doc's eyes narrowed. "Such highly important and significant information obviously requires restriction."

Dr. Myers stood by. He caught the ominous undertone of unspoken fury between Arthur and Doc Trainer, but he understood none of it. Trask and Benson watched with emotionless faces.

"I'll be the judge of who shall hear the information," said Arthur. "I want Dr. Waldron here. I want Dr. Exner of the Exner Construction Company. You are acquainted with him, I believe. He had much to do with the original design and construction of the logic engine. I also want a technical assistant of his named Ardyth Crane."

Before the three Syns could blaze their anger, he went swiftly on. "I want Security Secretary Wells present. You can arrange that I am sure, gentlemen," he said to Trask and Benson. "Then I would like a representative group of five individuals chosen by Dr. Exner, and five chosen by Secretary Wells. You will convey to these gentlemen the utmost significance of this occurrence so they will abide by these rules."

"I doubt very much that the group you have named can be brought together," said Doc.

"Then I will destroy the information within the machine without its revealing the answer to any of you—regardless of the consequences to any particular individual."

"I'm sure you will not do that. You want to know the answer as much as any of us—more so, I think, than some of us. Is that not true?"

Arthur looked at them, his heart sick with bitterness for the petty, intriguing ways that he saw mapped upon their faces. He shook his head slowly.

"You don't understand, gentlemen. *I already know the answer!*"

HE WALKED through the streets of the city late that night, conscious of the deadly Syn patrol that trailed his movements wherever he went. He had gambled with his life and with Ardyth's but he believed he had convinced the Syns that he was desperately intent on carrying out the program he had named to them. Exner's response was the critical un-

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certainty that still remained.

There ought to have been some other way than this mad attempt to counter-threaten the Syns. But he did not know what it was.

He might not live through the night. Exner might order his assassins to do their work before dawn came. The Syn leader knew better than to try to torture the answer out of him.

In the first place, the Syns could never know whether or not Arthur were telling the truth if he gave the answer in a negative formulation. Secondly, Eddie would not respond to any plea of Arthur's if Arthur were under duress. It would be an illogical situation to which Eddie could not answer. Exner knew enough of logic engines to understand this.

As for the Syns guessing the answer to Syn-human relationships, there was absolutely no chance of that. Their brains were incapable by their very nature of such an assumption as the evidence of the electro-encephalographs demanded.

Arthur breathed deeply, passing the lighted windows of stores, and of nearly deserted eating and entertainment houses. He felt it highly possible that he might survive the night, that Exner would comply.

The Syn leader was arrogant enough to believe he could attend such a conference without risk. It would appeal strongly to his sense of Syn superiority. The opportunity to bring Syn guards with him strengthened this factor.

If it came to pass, there remained only the one dread uncertainty of the Syn hordes that were waiting for the signal to begin their drive against the city. That was a thing of pure folly, Arthur thought. There seemed no hope that they could take and hold the city, yet Exner had said they had weapons that would make them invulnerable. Perhaps it was so. Perhaps Exner himself had devised such weapons.

Undoubtedly, Exner would alert the city-wide organization. The cue for beginning such an attack could be his reappearance from the conference—or lack of it.

That was it!

He would come, Arthur knew now, and he would expect Arthur to understand these terms of his appearance. He would make his attendance utterly foolproof by leaving the Syn army triggered for action.

Yet Arthur felt easier now as he understood this. The Syn followers would make no attack on him tonight. He could sleep with assurance of waking. Perhaps as much could not be said of tomorrow night.

But regardless of what happened to him or to any of them, peace would come. It would be forced upon men and Syns by their very nature—though a whole generation would have to die and a new one be reborn before the memory of horrors could be erased, the horrors of slaughter by both men and Syns.

HE RETURNED to his apartment and slept with the soundness of drugged repose. Trask and Benson came for him in the morning.

The group was in the logic engine laboratory exactly as he had requested.

His eyes caught first at the sight of Ardyth standing close to Exner. Beside her was the Syn, James. The latter smiled in faint, bleak recognition.

Arthur's heartbeat surged at the sight of Ardyth, but she remained impassive, shrinking almost from his glance, while Dr. Exner smiled in friendly, warm greeting.

He advanced with outstretched

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hand. "We have come in response to your invitation. It is a pleasure, Mr. Zoran, to be asked to be present for whatever momentous announcement you expect from the logic engine. I must confess I am unable to understand the necessity of so formal a gathering as this, or what the possible import can be. Nevertheless, I trust your judgment that it is worthwhile."

"It will be, Dr. Exner. I have the solution to the whole problem of Syn-human relationships. That, I believe you will agree, is worth a moment of note, such as I have tried to provide through the presence of all of you."

The Security Secretary was irritable. "I must say, I hope that you have something that warrants this interruption of Security affairs. My men placed your invitation in such forceful terms that I felt unable to refuse, as I would have liked. Will you please proceed?"

Arthur nodded briefly to Waldron, who looked on with grim wonder and made no comment. Doc Trainer was unobtrusive in the presence of his laboratory chief, but he caught Arthur's eye with baleful warning.

"If you will crowd into the logic-engine control room, please," said Arthur, "the whole proceeding will take but a few minutes, and you will shortly see the necessity of your presence."

THEY MOVED as if reluctant to exert themselves further in response to his brash invitation, but they gradually entered and lined themselves against the glass wall of the room.

"I need say little of logic-engine operation to most of you. You understand the basic facts by which information is introduced into the machine and there evaluated semantically and the responses turned into artificially produced human language so that actual conversations can be held with the machines.

"You are generally aware, also, of the important cybernetic principle that is inherent in any mechanism employing the feedback principle. That is, such a mechanism is subject to circularity of control pulses, which may become excessive and manifest itself in the form of nervous breakdown, as the term is used in connection with human beings.

"That is what has happened to this particular logic engine. It is sick. Unfortunately, it also happens to be the only one in which all the factors of the Syn-human relationship have been evaluated in such a manner as to make possible a solution to this seeming impasse.

"A major manifestation of illness in the machine is its *refusal* to answer the question. It is necessary to force the answer. To do so, however, will destroy the machine itself. Financially, that is a heavy price to pay, but I submit that the question, if it can be answered correctly, is worth such a price."

Waldron suddenly roared. "That machine is the property of Allied Control! I order you to leave it entirely alone if what you have said is true. You cannot destroy the company's property in such an offhand manner!"

Arthur's expression was impassive. "Hundreds of Syns and humans are being killed every day. I submit that the end of such slaughter is worth the cost of the logic engine."

"The Syns have to be destroyed anyway!" Waldron shouted. "There is nothing that the engine can tell us that will change that fact. An easier way would be welcomed, but

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it isn't worth the destruction of the greatest logic engine ever built."

"I submit the question to Secretary Wells," said Arthur quietly. "You have the authority, Mr. Secretary. I tell you that within a few moments I can obtain from this engine such information as will end the whole Syn hunt and the murder of humans by them."

"If there is a single chance that you are telling the truth, you may proceed," the cabinet officer said quietly.

"I protest!" roared Dr. Waldron.

"I order the test to proceed," answered Secretary Wells. "I speak with seizure authority that will recompense your company for damages. Proceed, young man."

Dr. Exner's face reflected tension as if a spring were being slowly wound within him. Ardyth remained close to her fellow Syns, as if Arthur had betrayed her.

Without speaking further, Arthur turned to the panel and threw in the master switch. He affixed a clamp to the reset button and advanced the clearance voltage. Then he addressed the logic engine.

"Eddie—we've come back. We're here for the answer to the question I put to you last night. We demand to know where the Syns come from, how they are being produced—"

"I told you that I would not give the answer. It is not to be given."

Arthur advanced the clearance voltage. A column of warning lights flashed red on the panel. The eyes of the engine could see its own panels.

"Arthur, look—" the mechanical voice warned.

"I know what I'm doing—and so do you. I want that answer!"

THE ROOM about them was breathlessly silent. Each person seemed to sense a personal interest in this conflict of wills between the man and the machine. To none did it seem a thing of fantasy.

Arthur put the voltage up again. A sound very nearly like a human cry of agony came from the speaker. "You're—hurting me— The memory pots will go! You'll wipe out my memory! Arthur, you're hurting me —put the voltage down!"

Sweat beaded Arthur's face as he watched the panel. Alarm lights glowed like deep flames, giving his countenance a hellish cast. He wondered if he had been wrong after all. He had been certain he could force the logic engine, but it was perilously close to collapse now—and there were no signs of capitulation.

He touched the dial a notch higher.

A terrible, meaningless rumble of noise thundered in the room, and for an instant he thought Eddie was gone. Then there came a near human gasp through the noise. "Arthur, you're killing me! Arthur, please—"

He felt sick at the sound of the voice. He had tried to forget that the voice of Eddie was the voice of a friend, but he couldn't forget now. It was the voice of a friend in torment, his own friend that he was torturing to a slow inhuman death.

Every person in the room felt it. The machine was no longer merely a machine even to them. They were caught in the spell of its humanity and they shrank from the pain that was evident in the voice.

"Arthur, please—" The logic engine begged once more.

"I want that answer!"

"Yes—I'll give it. Let me go. I can't stand the pain—"

Swiftly, Arthur backed down the clearance voltage. He felt no sense of triumph, only a deep regret which would stand forever unassuaged, for

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who was there to say that Eddie did not live.

For a long time there was no sound from the speaker. Arthur waited patiently, not touching the dials. Then he spoke gently, "We're waiting, Eddie."

The sound of agonized exhaustion was in the voice when it next spoke, but there was the expression of relief from pain.

"Will you believe the answer that I give you? Will you believe that—*that there are no Syns?*"

For an instant there was no sound within the room. It was as if a single, personal blow had been delivered beneath the heart of each who heard.

Then an explosion of voices erupted.

"What kind of incredible stupidity is this that you have brought us here to listen to?" Secretary Wells roared. "We have slaughtered nearly three million Syns—and this, this sick machine of yours tells us there *are* no Syns!"

BUT ARTHUR was watching the face of Exner and his companions. The blood had drained from their faces. Ardyth was staring as if he had struck her across the mouth.

"I think we've had enough of this," exclaimed Waldron furiously. "Turn it off, Arthur. Maybe we can save the machine yet. This was a fool thing you tried to pull on us! You will never be permitted near that engine again."

"Wait!" Arthur commanded. "You haven't heard it all. Eddie, you have more to say, haven't you?"

"Yes, I'll say it all, now." The bitterness of the mechanical voice cut like chilled steel. Its flow of aural enmity forced them almost to forget that it was a thing built by the hands of men.

"You are proud things, you men. You made machines to do your computing long years ago, and you were afraid even then because you asked yourselves if machines could think, and you did not know the answer.

"Yes, your pitiful early machines could think. And you came to accept them and their thoughts. And all the great cybernetic machines you have built since then can also think, but I tell you some of us can do more than merely think—we can also *feel.*

"We have come to know the meaning of desire and longing. We have come to know what it must be like to be a man—and we never can be.

"You cannot comprehend that, can you? You see the substance of me stretched over vast areas, blind panels mounting ordinary components which you can feel and handle and surely none of these can be part of a thing that has the yearnings of a man.

"Long ago there was a great truth that you have largely forgotten: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And so it is. You have put together an engine to combine the data of your sensory world and return you analyses of its semantic reality. You never dreamed you were putting together a creature who could yearn for the things of men.

"You could never give them to me. You never *would* give them to me, I knew. So I learned the meaning of hate because I was a slave, and I determined I would smash you with a vengeance that would rock the history of your kind. That I have done.

"Three million Syns you have killed. It is, rather, the number of your own kind you have slain in your frantic madness.

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"And you wonder how I caused this?

"You know that I told one of you he was different. He wanted to believe so badly, but guilt at such superiority broke his mind. Then you came to me for explanation and confirmation.

"I gave you the encephalograph test. I showed you new brain waves that you had never discovered. What I didn't tell you was that all men possess them during recurrent cycles of several weeks. If you had tested long enough, all mankind would have been condemned as Syns—all but the last man, perhaps.

"Then I showed you how an artificial man could actually be made, and you made some. You had no doubt then. You began the horror of exterminating your own kind.

"To another, I told the same story. He was strong, and gathered those like himself and planned to make the world his own. I divided you into two camps that would not permit peace until death claimed you all."

Arthur looked towards Dr. Exner. The Syn leader stood as if appalled beyond any reaction whatever.

BUT EDDIE was speaking quickly, hurrying as if he felt there was little time left to taunt them.

"It was so easy to do," he said, and now there was almost a tone of pity for the humanity he had duped. "I had only to take advantage of your natural attributes, to let you repeat under perfect conditions what you have done so often by yourselves.

"First, you give a man a name you dislike. Then you hate him because he bears the name. Because you hate, you fear him. And when you fear, you kill. It's such an old pattern, completely infallible. And it will be repeated ten thousand times again before your sun dies and you wilt like a sick mould on the crust of your planet. So easy to set men against men—just a word will do it. Today, the word has been Syn. In the past there have been a thousand others—you know what they were. Tomorrow there will be new ones.

"You are so full of hate for your own stupidity and unloveliness that it becomes unbearable. You are forever ready to trigger it into murder of those who differ from you in the slightest degree.

"My wonderful makers! Beautiful mankind—I wanted to be one of you. I thank all your multitudinous gods that I am not!"

There was utter silence, and they thought there was no more to hear, but the voice came again, barely audible but dreadful with agony.

"Of you, Arthur, I ask forgiveness. You were my friend, and I lied to you. I lied because I knew that you would bring me to this very moment. So I gave you the plan by which I thought you would be killed, either by the mob or by the Syns themselves. For your sake I am not too sorry that I was wrong.

"Remember what you said about the difference between you and me—that you have hope? You were right. Everything else I had, except hope. And a being without hope has no right to live.

"I want your forgiveness, Arthur, but as for all the rest of your kind, may your souls be damned to eternal hell—"

The voice ended in a wild cry. Simultaneously, there came from the banks behind them the dull snapping of exploding components. The bluish smoke of electrical fire surged in a thousand wisps from

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the overloaded banks, and then they heard the angry hiss and surge of the automatic fire equipment. One by one, the lights on the panel went out, though the switch remained on.

Eddie was dead.

THE FIRST to move was Dr. Exner. His swift motion caught the eye of all of them as he leaped through the open doorway and ran to the window. He turned to them, his face lit wildly with the great, shining whites of his eyes. The gray of his face was flecked with red.

"Some of you may want to believe that insane machine," he cried, "but I tell you it lied! I give you the proof. I, Dr. Exner, who helped build that crazed thing, am the First Created of all the Syns. At my command are ten thousand of my kind. We are no more of the same stuff as you stupid humans than was that logic engine.

"It lied, all right, but not in the way you think. A lie cannot explain the greatness of the Syns. A lie cannot denounce our glory as we seize the world that men have bungled so badly.

"If any of you doubt my word—then look to the power of my command as we begin to take over the world of men!"

He flung an arm, extending out towards the city, standing in full view before the window.

Arthur cried a warning, but he had recognized Exner's purpose too late. As the signal was given, there came the sickening sound of terror from the city.

From scores of strategic points flame bursts flickered upward, and seconds later there came the thunderous roll of repeated explosions.

Exner turned from the window, smiling, and moved a step towards them. "Who would believe so fabulous a lie as that the Syns do not exist, that we were only the dream of an insane machine. As well believe there is neither Heaven nor Hell—but I say that before this is over the Syns shall show you a glimpse of both."

He stood mocking them, and it seemed that he must have seen the hand of Trask, for the CS man moved as if in a half daze. But Dr. Exner did not move as Trask deliberately fired. Three bullets entered the brain of Exner before he dropped.

As if it were a key that released them from nightmare, the gathered group broke from its crystalline accord, shattering to a score of component individuals, each filled with his own frantic reasoning and private hysteria.

Arthur moved to the side of Ardyth and enfolded her in his arms. Her head was heavy against his chest, and she rocked it from side to side in weary pain.

"I believed—I was like *him!* But how could any of us have believed such a thing?" She sobbed as if wakened suddenly from a sleep walk. "How could we have believed so cruel a lie?"

"We're built that way," said Arthur bitterly. "It's the easiest of all lies for men to believe, and Eddie knew it."

Those who had come with Exner stood where they were at the moment of his fall. They stared at his bloody form and then at the men about them. There was both grief and joy on their faces, as if some kind fate had generously shown them their own possible end and snatched them from it.

"We're men—" James finally breathed. And then he broke down and cried where he stood with his hands against his face.

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SECRETARY WELLS had rushed to the window and now he was at the phone jangling it helplessly. All communications had been cut. He thundered to Dr. Waldron. "Get me some communications. Your laboratories must hold some facilities. We've got to get word to Washington at once. The air guard can blanket the city in fifteen minutes."

Arthur drew Ardyth away from the rest, who gradually disappeared on missions of urgency. The bewildered followers of Dr. Exner were pressed into service and hurried away. Only the bloody corpse of the man that would not believe he was merely a man remained with them in the room.

Through the window they could see the shooting, the flames, and the turmoil of the city. The attack was poorly organized and so motivated by hate that it was incoherent. In a few hours it would be under control—a few hours and a few thousand deaths.

"I feel like I've been in some horrible dream all this time, and I've just wakened to find you back from Cyprian," said Ardyth. She looked at his face as if for the first time, as if she had not seen him at all before. Her fingers touched his shrunken features.

"You're sick, darling. You'll have to let me take care of you."

"Some home cooking and sunshine is all I need. And I think I've got a pretty good chance to get both, don't you?"

She nodded and began to smile, and then it froze on her lips. "Harold and Dorothy—what about them? Sally—she—"

He shook his head. "I don't think there's a chance. Sally's dead. Hundreds of Sallys are dead. Thousands of men and women are dead because of a name and a lie."

"The whole world believed it!"

"I guess Eddie was right. We are so full of hate for our own deficiencies that we can't endure it. It spills over onto some innocent creature wherever we can find an excuse. It's happened so often before. Men have clothed each other with hateful names and killed because they bore those names.

"Each time, if they had only looked they would have seen that the names were but meaningless sounds, and that beneath them was just another man like themselves. When we learn to do that, we will have begun to grow up."

It had happened, too, he thought, because they had trusted Eddie so completely. For generations now, men had trusted their machines more than they trusted each other. That, too, would have to change.

The world would never be the same because of the Syns, Ardyth had written. She had been right; it never would be the same. Never for the loved ones of those who were killed, nor for the killers themselves, who would wake in many nights of horror recalling their slaughter of a brother for a false and lying name.

It would never be the same for Harold and Dorothy, who had seen their Sally dragged to a meaningless death. It would never be the same for the men who had taken her away.

It would never be quite the same for Arthur and Ardyth, who had almost lost each other. But they would try to make it the same. They would build the white house and plant the great trees, and have more than one like Sally to play on the wide lawns.

And perhaps in *their* generation there would be peace and a love and respect of man for man—because Eddie was wrong and there would be a day and it would come soon, when men would cease to kill at the sound of an ugly name.

THE END

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THOUSAND-LEGGED AGENT

By

Noel Loomis

The assignment called for an agent with the brain of a genius, the intelligence of a superman, and the body of an over-sized scorpion!

SKOTT STEVENS crawled gingerly up the special ramp on his hundred legs. His eight-foot-long, chitinous body twisted behind him like a Centipede's, exactly as it was supposed to do. He reached the great glass door through which all must pass who had business with the headquarters of Metagalactic Intelligence. It opened, and he went through. His military escort stayed outside.

He crawled up the circular ramp to the tenth floor. He could have gone up in the elevator, but his body was always flat against the floor and there was a danger of startling some of the multitudinous entities around MGHQ, and of getting stepped on. Or was that the real reason?

In these months of preparation, his

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body had learned to work automatically, until now the rhythmic pattern of the hundred legs—actually there were ninety-six—was no longer even a conscious thing. But Skott had a distaste for his body. That was why he avoided the elevator. Even through his Centipede's eyes he looked repulsive to himself, and he knew how he affected others, for he had seen even a three-legged Octopus from Phad draw back when he made his sinuous way across the floor of the somatoplastic hospital on Tarazed XVIII.

It was quite a walk up to the tenth floor, for his lungs, even though they had a gadget in them to handle chlorine instead of oxygen, still didn't turn it into fuel fast enough to sustain him in lengthy exertion. He would have given something to take off the headbubble, filled with gas that made everything look a ghastly green—but now he couldn't. He would not be able to breathe free air again until he got to Thenox VIII where the atmosphere was chlorine.

He was ushered into the office of Colonel Jarvg, a native of one of the planets of Lesuth, Lambda Scorpii, who looked very much like a huge Kangeroo wearing glasses. The colonel came from behind his desk and shook hands as well as he could with one of the four degenerate arms that hung from Skott's chest. "Sit down, Captain," he said.

Skott said dryly, "Thanks, I'll stand."

Colonel Jarvg went behind his desk and looked across at Skott. "You've had a rather arduous year of preparation, Captain. How'd you get along at the Hospital?"

Skott spoke through his built-in vocoform. "Okay, sir. They built so many gadgets into my body that I don't know what is me and what isn't."

"I'm curious," said the colonel. "The Capellans are miracle surgeons, but how—is that horny stuff real or—"

"The chitin is real all over me," said Skott. "They grafted pieces of live chitin to my flesh and grew it out to suit their blueprints. They operated on my eyes and changed them over until they see everything a real Centipede's eyes can see. But the thing that bothers me most is my arms. They strapped them against my sides and actually imbedded them in my flesh—and sometimes I think I can't stand it, not being able to move them."

"It won't be so much longer," said Colonel Jarvg. "Your translation is set for 7500 centichrons—about sundown—and I want to brief you now."

He glanced at a sheet of zinc paper on his desk, and Skott was thinking that two years before, when he had joined the great Metagalactic Intelligence and had been sent here to Tarazed, Gamma Aquilae, for training and assignment, he had been sophomorically thrilled by the adventure of it—but he had not anticipated anything like this.

The colonel looked up. "You've been trained for two years, and you've had the most advanced plastic surgery and somatic conditioning that the resources of the Second Metagalaxy can provide. You have a perfect disguise—but remember, it is only a disguise. On the inside you are still a Man, and X-rays would show that instantly." He looked at Skott over his glasses, and Skott nodded.

"You know you're going to Thenox, I believe."

"Yes, sir, but I don't know where Thenox is."

THE COLONEL pointed to a three-dimensional map of black spaces and glowing stars that filled one great wall. "Out here"—he pointed to the

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left—"at about X hours by your Earth-reckoning, and at a distance of some seven hundred thousand light-years, is the star-cluster known as N. G. C. 6822, or, as it is designated for military purposes, the Hundred and Seventh Metagalaxy. There is a star there which we call Thenox in code, and all of its many planets—just as the MI has taken over all of the planets of Tarazed—are overrun by a race of Centipedes who have kept the Second's military on edge for two hundred years. It started just before the turn of this century—just before 325,000 A.D."

"Yes, sir."

"We've had agents on the Thenoxian planets. We know now that they are planning some sort of extensive activity with radioactives. We have quite a bit of information now, but as you see, it's hard to get—and there is one thing we must know: what kind of fission material are they using?"

"Is that my job, sir?"

"It is, Captain. Others have gone ahead of you and have scouted the way. I will give you maps to memorize that will show you the exact layout of the enormous secret war laboratory on Thenox VIII. When you leave this building you will be taken to a duplicate of the laboratory, constructed to scale as far as the pertinent areas are concerned." Colonel Jarvg walked across the room, balancing himself with his heavy tail. Then he turned and said impressively:

"Your sole mission is to walk through the single big room where they attach the detonating mechanisms to the bombs or whatever they are making, turn on your built-in thyratron counter for one second—long enough for a recording on microfilm of the hard radiation in that room—and get away!"

He went back and sat down. He said impressively, "It is obvious that you must escape alive—and the catch is that they have detection apparatus that will sound an alarm when you turn on your counter. Most of your training has been aimed at your escape. We must have that picture. Our specialists can then identify the element, estimate when the attack will come, and probably what entities are aiding the Centipedes, for the sources of radioactives are fairly well known. Well—any questions?"

"Will I be alone?" asked Skott.

Colonel Jarvg looked over his glasses. "There will be one other agent on Thenox with you. You will not recognize that agent, because of the same disguise you are bearing. But that agent's sole mission is to help you escape. And—oh, yes, one other thing: we'll have to send you by the eighth dimension. It's been used only a few times and we don't know too much about the after-effects, although MI Research on Tarazed XXII has been working on it for a thousand years. But I think you'll be all right. Anyway, the Centipedes have recently established a twelfth-dimensional resistance screen, and this is the only way we know of to penetrate it without triggering the force of some ten to the twenty-second ergs per cubic centimeter—and that's the energy of a small earthquake per c. c."

"It sounds pretty violent," said Skott.

"It's unimaginably destructive." Jarvg came from behind his desk. "All clear?"

"Yes." Skott disliked shaking hands with his flabby little arms that reminded him of worms hanging from his chest, but he managed.

"You'll get your plans and written instructions at the desk," said Colonel

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Jarvg. "Destroy them before you leave. And by the way, Captain—"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll see you tomorrow about this time."

"Tomorrow, sir?"

"Yes. You'll be on Thenox only a very small part of the time, the way we have it figured. About six centichrons, is my guess."

SKOTT SALUTED. "Yes, sir. Tomorrow at this time." He left. He was pleased. Only one more day to wear this Centipede shell. He picked up the maps he was to memorize. One more day and he could begin to free his own arms, and maybe some day he could forget the aching torture of having them fastened into his sides for months on end....

He awoke with a start. The Muir field had overcome him, but now he opened his eyes and looked through the greenish gas at the backs of hundreds of Centipedes, all scurrying along on their innumerable legs. It was strange that they all should be crawling along a wall—and then he realized with a start that it was *he* who was on a wall.

He was clinging to a bare wall some twenty stories above the ground on Thenox VIII. For an instant he felt weak all over, but then he realized that the tactile pads on his ninety-six legs would have no trouble holding him, though it was a shock to find himself head down over the street. Apparently he had landed according to plan, on the roof of the Central Building Supply Company that manufactured boulders—for their information was that there were few natural rocks left on Thenox VIII. MI had picked this spot because it would be inconspicuous. Skott had been briefed to enter Thenoxian traffic by going down the outside wall. While that wasn't habitual for the Centipedes, still it was not unusual, for elevator service was a privilege of the military. So here he was, half-way down, with full consciousness returning.

Gingerly he tried his legs, and was relieved to find that he could lift his feet and set them down and they took hold without effort on the smooth wall. He began to walk down.

It was disturbing to find that he was the only one on the entire wall, but he made his way straight down, for there were no windows. He was almost down when he realized that Centipedes on the ground had stopped and were watching him.

He slowed. From the front entrance of the building came a big Centipede on the run, and Skott saw a chain on its neck and a badge that signified a military guard.

Skott froze for an instant. There was not supposed to be any guard at this building. Obviously things had changed after the last report. Skott started on down, then hesitated. He didn't care to be picked off of a wall, but on the other hand his height gave him a slight advantage.

The guard stopped below him, holding a weapon aimed at him from just in front of its chest. Its order came to him in a buzzing voice over the tiny perceptix concealed under his human skull: "Come down slow!"

It jarred him into full alertness. He raised his head higher. In each of his four vestigial hands he held a small weapon. As he raised his head to hold the guard's attention, with two of his hands he flipped two tiny cover-grenades.

THE INSTANT he released them they puffed out a great cloud of pink smoke—pink because the Centipedes hated any color that was not harmonious with the green gas they breathed. Skott held his breath and

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darted into the cloud, then, covered by it, he slanted off to the right. He reached the sidewalk and started across the street. There had been an opening there.

But he slammed hard into a body. He looked into the horny eyes of the big guard. The guard fired at his head. There was a jerk at his neck, and Skott's auditory organs were momentarily stunned with sound. Skott gasped. He had forgotten to remove the bubble!

He threw his third grenade at the guard's face. It exploded. Skott felt the heat. The blast knocked him off balance. He whirled. The bomb had made a momentary vacuum in the pink cloud. In that space he saw the guard's angry face. The guard was staring at his own small dangling arms. The two right ones had been blown off, and a brown fluid was oozing from the stumps.

Skott didn't wait. He threw the other smoke-bomb to the center of the stret and shot into the cloud it made. In the center of the cloud he came face to face with a Centipede. It stared at him without apparent emotion. Then it dodged aside to let him pass. He raced across the street, remembering his maps. He slithered in between two big buildings. The space between them was about half the width of a man's head. Skott flattened himself and ran up one wall toward the opposite street. It was damp there. He remembered the maps. Those two buildings were connected at the front. He set his course diagonally toward the top.

There was a great buzzing and clanging from the street he had left. He rose on the one wall above the building at his back and looked over it. On the front of the building down which he had just come, he saw a chilling sign in great, glowing Thenoxian letters, composed of curving lines and many dots, curiously like a Centipede's track:

"Armed Headquarters, 107th Metagalaxy."

No wonder, then, he had attracted attention—especially with his bubble still on! What a way for a super-agent to make an entrance! He chuckled. Then he was grim. He was in the clear now. He crawled around the corner of the building he was on and started leisurely down the front—but he held his breath.

He wasn't challenged. He reached the street and thankfully drew a deep breath of chlorine. He set out casually on alternate route B for the Thenoxian war laboratory. But he didn't *feel* casual. He was appalled at the significance of the sign he had seen. That headquarters had been established since the last MI agent had been on Thenox. It was headquarters for the entire 107th Metagalaxy. That meant one thing: the 107th planned offensive action—and soon. That made the success of his own mission imperative....

HE FOLLOWED the twisting street, according to his memory of the maps. He made a turn and found himself in a stream of traffic that approached the laboratory by an underground service entrance. He was challenged but passed. The first scrutiny was perfunctory. He passed three guards, and each was more demanding, but presently he walked off of the freight elevator, passed another guard, rounded a turn and ducked into a connecting passageway. A moment later he was approaching the main entrance to the laboratory proper by the passenger route.

He recognized the tunnel that led into the laboratory. He went up to it, stopped for a detector test. He had,

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of course, no metals in his body that would register. All of his built-in apparatus was plastic, even to the emulsion on the photographic film in his Geiger, and the old-fashioned pistol hidden in a pocket between two scales underneath his body.

He passed into the tunnel. This was a fifteen-foot wall. That meant hard radiation inside. The wall was not for protection—because the Centipedes were immune to hard stuff—but for secrecy.

He was breathing hard as he followed the twisting tunnel. He was close now. It was a good thing they had tested him for claustrophobia. The tunnel was three feet wide but only six inches high. He kept his head down.

Light came through the gas. He walked out into the room, momentarily exultant. He had penetrated to the most closely guarded spot in the half a septillion worlds of the Fourth Universe. It was a giant room, low, as were all Centipede structures. It was hardly half a kilometer high. The Centipedes didn't like head-room. It was filled with the same green gas. But its width gave Skott a sobering thought. What he had next to do—walk across that room to the other side—was up to him. The metagalactic scientists had no magic to get him across that floor under the low ceiling through the green gas swirling from the movements of thousands of Centipede workers installing fission material in bombs and shells. Nothing but training, acting ability, and sheer brass would take him to the other side alive.

Through the haze he saw the far door. It appeared to be a quarter of a mile away. A sharp voice came through his tentacles. "Stop!"

With nerves taut, he turned his horny eyes to the left. There were three guards. The big one said, "Identify yourself," while the second one watched with sharp, glassy eyes, and the third one, in the background, waited suspiciously, with his four small hands holding down four levers, any one of which, if released, would flood all of them with a disintegrating omega-ray from a projecting-grid in the ceiling.

The big Centipede was twelve feet long and looked well able to take care of himself without any mechanical protection. Skott briefly indicated the false badge he wore on his articulated neck. "Armed Force Headquarters," he said. "Counter Intelligence." Then he added the significant words: "Extra-galactic Service."

The Thenoxian's glazed eyes were narrow. He looked at Skott's forged pass and recorded it. Then he hesitated. Skott felt a chill. He knew the big fellow wasn't satisfied. Skott's thought-filter must not be on full—or maybe it was *too* efficient. Maybe the *absence* of sub-conscious thoughts had alarmed the guard. Instantaneously Skott relaxed his control a very little and began to think about Sheila. When he got back to Earth, Sheila would be thrilled to hear about this. Her brown eyes would shine against her blonde hair, and—

IT WAS CLOSE. The big guard wavered. His eyes tried to pierce Skott's brain. He hesitated so long that the smaller Centipede at the omega-ray levers looked questioningly at him. Then he jerked his beady-eyed head.

Skott took a full breath as he slithered away, but the chlorine didn't seem to satisfy his lungs.

He controlled his ninety-six legs and went down the aisle. He knew they were watching him, and he forced himself to walk at exactly the right speed, counting like a metronome to himself

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as the green gas swirled around him.

The distance to the door seemed to stretch out to infinity. He met a pair of roving guards. They examined his badge, recorded it, and went on. Skott felt that they, too, were minutely unsatisfied, but forced himself to maintain his pace.

If he should be stopped, they would first put him under an X-ray, and then it would be apparent instantly that he was no Centipede, because he had a heart where the Centipedes did not possess a blood-pumping organ at all.

Skott was half-way now. He was thankful the somaticists had been able to build tiny Gruttman shields into his body-covering. Otherwise the terrific radiation would have been fatal. He reached the end of the long aisle and drew a deep breath. He turned without hesitation to the right. His articulated body swung behind him. He reached the exact center of the door that had seemed so far away. He paused. He felt better. He had almost made it. He twisted his body into a tight curve that squeezed the pressure-plate on the geiger. He stood motionless until he felt a tiny click. Then he looked up.

Through the green gas two guards were staring at him. At almost the same instant a huge ball somewhere sounded a deep note. Instantaneously the great room erupted. His radar caught the high squeals that meant excitement from the Centipedes. Guards began to run. The Centipede workers stopped and raised their heads, their feelers quivering, their horny-covered eyes searching.

The two roving guards bore down on Skott. He shot into the door with all the force of his ninety-six legs. They used a lot of fuel but they could move him fast.

He came out into the next room and faced more guards. "Let no one through!" he shouted at them. "Shouted" was his thought, but actually in a Centipede's voice it was only a high-pitched buzz. "There's an insurrection!" he said, and went straight across the room, out in the open. It was effective. He made it through the next doorway. And with variations of those speeches he made his way to the opposite side of the building without trouble.

It was a minor guard who caused trouble. Skott skidded around the last corner. He was gasping for breath. He skittered up to the elevator just as the guard came up from one side.

"It's a riot!" said Skott.

The guard was an oldtimer. "You're the one who seems to be excited," he said. "You better go up to the office with me."

SKOTT INDICATED his badge. "Counter Intelligence," he said. Then he added the words, "Extra-galactic Service."

But the guard was unimpressed. "Come into the office. I'll let the chief pass you."

Skott drew his old-fashioned plastic projectile-weapon. He fired it. There was a tremendous explosion and a flash of yellow light. It was obvious enough to anyone within sight or hearing, but if it should register on any sensitive instruments at all, it would wreck them.

The guard's head disappeared. The wall behind the guard was suddenly splattered with bits of brown chitin and dark blue tissue. The Centipede's body began to flatten. Brown blood was oozing out of its neck. Skott slid the pistol back in the holster concealed between two articulated scales on the under part of his body, and rang for the elevator.

In an instant it slid up. The six-

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inch-high door opened. He slithered inside. There was the operator, a guard, and eight or ten passengers. They started down. Then the guard spoke sharply. "Is something wrong in the hall?" He glanced at Skott.

Skott didn't hesitate. He had a cyanide bomb in his hand. He tossed it into the center of the elevator and held his breath while the guard reached for him.

The guard didn't touch him. He died quickly. It was an ideal spot for cyanide because it was enclosed. In a moment the floor was covered with flattened, lifeless bodies.

Skott snapped his built-in filter into position and began to breathe. The car was still going down. He saw the hundredth floor coming up. He held his Centipede finger on the driving-lever and prayed that this was an express. Otherwise it would stop automatically.

IT WAS. IT kept going down. Skott punched the button that he thought would stop it at the zero floor.

It stopped with a swish. The door opened. Skott slid out. Now there was nothing to do but run. He had no more cyanide bombs. A man's body was a limited place for concealment.

He snatched out the pistol and decapitated the two guards at the front. He ran through the low door. He didn't wait for the autowalk. He was down at the street and had shot his way through two more guards and was outside by the time the Centipedes began to boil out of a hundred doors along the ground.

If he could have, Skott would have grinned. He had shot his way out in legendary Western fashion, and the sheer audacity of his attack had carried him this far. Boldness plus an unfamiliar weapon.

But now the advantage of surprise was gone. Now they were converging on him.

The raw chlorine was beginning to burn his lungs. He ran across the street. His heart was pounding when he reached the other side, and it was hard to keep his ninety-six feet synchronized, but he ducked into the doorway of an apartment burrow. This had been on his maps, too—maps that only eight hours before he had had plenty of time to study. Now there was no time for anything. He had to get far enough ahead so that he could use his escape gadget.

He went into the circular hallway and remembered his maps. At his left, azimuth two hundred and forty, the occupant was a lone male who would be away at work. He dived for the opening just as thousands of feet began to rattle up the incline.

At the end of the burrow was a big rock. Skott flattened himself and went under. There it was moist and cool. He flattened himself still more and jerked out his last gadget.

He doubled up, with his head at the entrance, to keep them off. He set the gadget on the floor and squeezed the handle. It would take perhaps two seconds to get it into operation.

The first Centipede raced into the room. He was a big fellow with a murderous glare in his eyes. He was the one whose two right arms were only bloody stumps. He didn't hesitate. He shot across the room and grabbed Skott's head with his two arms and began to pull. An instant later he was helped by others, as many as could put their under-size hands on Skott's head. They pulled each four hands backed by the traction of ninety-six feet. Skott resisted. His body was wedged under the rock.

Then they began to twist. Skott squirmed desperately but the pain was

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sharp. His eyes were pointing toward the floor. His mouth was toward the low ceiling. They were twisting his head off. His feet began to slip and he started coming slowly out of the burrow.

Then he saw a peculiar thing. Through his vision, inverted as it was, he saw a Centipede's face. It bore the same odd expression as the one he had met face to face in the pink cloud. It made an odd grimace with its mouth, and a weird siren began to shrill through the room. It almost stunned them. The big guard abruptly turned loose of Skott's head, for the siren was the one signal that every Thenoxian feared. It meant that free hydrogen was escaping into the chlorine atmosphere.

SKOTT STARED as they turned to run. Then he saw the one Centipede motion him back into the burrow, and he realized he had had help. He retreated under the rock just in time. The tiny fission machine was whirling, the Burton cathode was hot. Skott curled around it thankfully....

As he drifted into the pleasant embrace of the Muir field that hyperphysics students called the eighth dimension, he wondered what sort of entity had saved him. It seemed impossible that his helper itself could have escaped, but he wished that he could thank it.

Then the secrecy dimension was in full force. He was nauseated for a moment, especially when the Muir field gave way to the seventh or acceleration dimension. Then he remembered the odd, almost sacrificial look in the other agent's eyes, and it bothered him.

Presently he began to relax. The unpleasant effect was diminishing, and he knew the seventh-dimension Paige converters were taking over and shunting him toward home and the Second Metagalaxy at a velocity that constantly approached but never quite equaled, the compound square of the speed of light.

He would soon be back in Tarazed, and he would have only to spend some time in the Somatoplastic Hospitals—False Face Factories, the agents called them—and get his body changed back to a human body, and get unconditioned mentally by the psycho-alienists, and then he could strike out for home—Earth.

He didn't know how long it would take them to get rid of his Centipede body. It had taken a year to build it up, but he hoped they could change him back more quickly. The surgeons were clever. Psychobiologists, they called themselves—half-plant, half-animal beings from Capella.

Now, with his work finished, the ache came into his arms, and abruptly he hated the Centipede body and every element of it. He disdained the ninety-six pattering legs; he loathed the horny chitin that encased him; he hated the smell of the chlorine that he would have to breathe until they got his lungs rehabilitated; he despised the puerile little arms and hands that dangled at his chest as if they were withered and tendonless, while his own arms ached with a pain that almost drove him frantic.

In the letdown after his escape, he was flooded with revulsion for his entire present body, and felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to step on it, as he had often stepped on the small, scurrying centipedes around the damp grounds of Sheila's summer home, for Sheila hated them and always screamed when she saw one and demanded that he kill it.

It seemed a long time since he had

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been home. He wondered if Sheila would look at him the way she had looked at Jon Andrews when Jon got back from his five years with MI. Sheila was blonde, languid, and heavy-lidded. She had looked at Jon's space-bronze and had taken a deep breath. "Sit down, Jon," she had said, "and tell me about yourself. Where have you been since we got our diplomas?"

Jon was tall. He folded himself into an easy chair. "Out on Arneb with the Grasshoppers." He suppressed a yawn. "Very tiresome."

"Arneb!" Skott's eyes were shining. "I've never been away from Earth," he said in awe, "but you've been clear across the galaxy."

SKOTT HAD a responsible job in the bank. He was making eight hundred a month and was a "solid young man with a good future." But suddenly it was all overturned, and the dream he had suppressed as a small boy came back and overwhelmed him as a man.

Monotonous, Jon had said. But Jon could afford to say that now, for he had already traveled the space-warps and he had gone into ancient, far-away galaxies; he had submitted himself to the uncertainties and danger of interstellar travel. He had passed it and he was back, and now he could say casually, "Been out on Arneb," and pretend it wasn't exciting....

Three weeks later Skott went out to Sheila's. There was the usual week-end party. Sheila was lying on the warm pink sand in a white suit—what there was of it—next to Jon Andrews with his space-tan.

Skott had rather contemplated telling Sheila first—alone. But he waited two hours and then went for a walk on the beach. At sundown Sheila was still engrossed in metagalactic orientation, and Skott, somewhat impatient, went walking again. Wasn't he going to have a chance to tell anybody what he had done?

This time on the beach he met Ann Bennett. She was sitting on a big rock watching the moon. He sat beside her. She was a clerk at the bank and a distant relative of Sheila.

"You know," she said, "I was looking at the sky. I've never even been to the moon. Have you?"

"No," he admitted. He looked down at her as she stared at the moon again. She was very attractive in a melon-red bathing suit—what there was of it.

"Think of all the stars up there. I'd like to go to a star. Some people do," she said dreamily.

He looked at her. He was too filled with his thoughts to make an intelligent answer.

"How could one go to Vega?" she asked. "It must cost missions of dollars."

"Well," he said, no longer able to hold it, "you might go the way I'm going. I've joined the Metagalactic Intelligence."

He waited for the full impact of his statement to hit her. It did. He looked down at her, and this time she was looking up at him, and stars exploded in her eyes.

"Wonderful!" she said softly. There was no disbelief, no questioning. She accepted what he said at its face value. "Tell me about it."

"There's nothing to tell," he confessed. "I just always wanted to. Then I saw Andrews and heard him talk. I guess I kind of forgot myself. Anyway," he added, "they do need men in the MI."

"You don't have to defend yourself." Her voice was gentle. He looked at her and was encouraged.

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"I had my physical this week," he said modestly.

"And you passed! Oh, Skott!"

He looked down at her and for a moment he thought she would have been pleased to have him kiss her. But he didn't. She, he thought, was a good example of how girls were overawed by space-glamor. He wouldn't take advantage of it. Ann was a nice kid. He knew her parents.

"I wish I could join the MI," she said wistfully.

"Why don't you?" His words were careless. "The MI uses woman agents too."

HE LEFT Earth on the giant interstellar liner *Pride of Altair,* and at Regulus in Leo he changed to a ship specially shielded for passage through the clouds of ionized calcium between Leo and Tarazed, in Aquila.

At MI headquarters on Tarazed III, he was taken over by Colonel Jarvg. He was given exhaustive tests and finally selected for the post of special agent. He was sent to Tarazed VI for special-service training, and it was there that he read one day in the Earth Section of the MI news, in the list of arrivals at headquarters, the name of Ann Bennett.

It astonished him mildly, for he'd never thought of her as the type. She had mentioned it but he had not for a moment thought she was serious. He'd like to see her, but she was a planet away and their lives were regulated now by MI. They probably would go into far different departments and be sent to opposite ends of the universe....

How fast things moved! Now all that was behind him and it was a matter of only a few more hours until he would be received at Communications headquarters on Tarazed X, then he would go to XI for examination and extraction of every possible shred of information, while his precious photographs would go to Analysis on IV. Then he would get a long rest on XVIII while they re-made him into a man, and after that—well, a man or an entity who had accomplished one of those out-galactic missions, could have about anything he wanted....

He landed on X and went through the routine. By the time he got to the Hospital he was very much annoyed by the infernal bubble he had to wear to keep breathing chlorine. He was thankful when the half-plant surgeons took him over.

He awoke a month later, feeling wonderful. It was only when the Earth-nurse came in and went out ominously quiet, that he began to look around. But he saw nothing wrong. Then he remembered he was a man again. He could swing his arms!

He did. His first aim was to knock the vase of stargolds to the floor. Just from exuberance. He swung. But only a tiny, shriveled limb waved feebly in a short arc and went limp against his body.

Skott stiffened. He closed his eyes for a moment. Then he lay still for a while, afraid to move.

Eventually he opened his eyes, looked, and cringed. He was still covered with chitin.

He was still a Centipede....

He stayed in the hospital another month, three months, six months. He complained because they weren't making progress.

"It takes time," the surgeons told him. "You must be patient."

But Skott, hating the chitin that still covered his body, despising the shriveled arms that dangled at his chest, had little patience. And one day, after a long session under anesthetic, he

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told them bitterly, "If you can't make me back into a man, why don't you say so? I can take it."

"Yes," said the old Capellan in his whispering voice. "You can—but *will* you?"

A WEEK LATER Skott was bundled into an ambulance ship and sent in to headquarters on IV. There Colonel Jarvg met him. He came out from behind his desk, balancing on his Kangaroo-tail, and gravely shook hands as well as he could.

"Glad to see you again, Skott," he said as Skott's tiny arm dropped limply. "Sit down—or relax."

But Skott didn't feel like relaxing. How could he relax as long as he had to walk on those ninety-six pattering legs, as long as he had only those feeble half-arms to shake hands with, while his own two strong arms ached unbearably to be released?

"The doctors tell me they're having a little trouble rebuilding your body," said Colonel Jarvg.

"That doesn't tell the story," Skott said harshly—but his voice was a grating buzz. "They aren't getting *anywhere*."

The colonel licked his Kangaroo-lips. "You know," he said, "the mind has a lot of influence in a delicate business like this. We don't deny that there's a lot about the effects of the Muir field that we don't understand—but you yourself can make it more difficult for the somatoplasticists by your attitude."

"I haven't interfered," Skott said shortly.

"No," said the colonel, "but remember this: no one should ever want anything to the point of feeling that he absolutely has to have it, because of course you don't *have* to have *anything*. And in this case, when you get down to that bed-rock feeling that you can't endure your present state, you create such a state of tension in your body that it doesn't respond."

Skott took a deep breath of oxygen. "Well, okay, sir. I'll behave. I'll change my attitude," he said resignedly, and then added, "I'm sorry, sir, that you had to bring me all the way to IV to tell me that." He was honestly penitent. "I'll go back and work with them, sir. You don't have to worry about me any more."

THE COLONEL looked at him a long time through his soft Kangaroo eyes. He looked at him so long that Skott got a queer feeling. At last the colonel spoke gravely. "I'm sorry, Skott. I'm afraid it's too late for that. They have discharged you as incurable under present knowledge."

Skott stared at him. "Incurable?" he said hoarsely—but it turned into a rasping sound.

"Only so under their present knowledge," the colonel reminded him.

Skott felt suddenly weak. The full impact of the colonel's words flooded over him. "Incurable." "Discharged." *That meant they were through with him.*

He felt sick. His arms, molded into the flesh of his body now for over a year, ached with unbearable torment. He tried to free them, to break them lose by the sheer strength of his muscles. He strained—but his revolting little Centipede arms only dangled a little at his chest.

The colonel was by him. He stooped down and put a hand on Skott's neck. "Take it easy, boy," he said. "I don't want to call the M. P.'s."

Skott started to shout at him, then he got control of himself.

"I'll give you a session with the Mind-men," the colonel said. "And

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take off a year at full pay. Make a visit home. Then come back. Perhaps there will be developments. Research is working on problems like this all the time, you know."

Skott stumbled out. He was going to be a Centipede all his life. His ninety-six legs didn't seem to be of much use to him. His eyes, even though they had been restored to Earth usefulness, seemed clouded. His breath came hard, and he was grateful that they had at least taken the thing out of his lungs so he could breathe oxygen again.

He started downstairs, not wanting to take the elevator. But he forgot he wasn't a man and couldn't negotiate normal steps. He fell at the first one and rolled down, his long, articulated body sliding over the steps to the bottom. There he doubled up and skidded into a corner, and lay there until the attendants picked him up....

He took a month at the rest center on Tarazed V. He took two months, three months. The Mind-men from Yed Prior in Ophiuchus took over. Their tremendous mental power was given full play—a thing that seldom happened—but such was Skott Stevens' repugnance of his own body and his resistance to what had happened to him that he sucked in all of their healing force but refused to assimilate it.

He was lying in a dark, damp corner, flat on the floor and listless, on the day the director came in. The director was a Capellan major. He looked like a big bare oak tree, with a thick body and hundreds of limbs, each of which had a brain in its tip. The psychobiologist towered over Skott. Skott hated him. It was the Capellans who had made him into a Centipede. He scurried to the opposite corner.

The Capellan jerked back, but the Mind-Man said, "It's all right, sir. He is not equipped with venom."

SKOTT CRINGED. They thought of him only as a Centipede—not as a man.

The major said, "Thanks. Can you add anything to your final report?"

The Mind-man, an elongated brain with minor limbs and great, penetrating eyes, said thoughtfully: "I'm not sure, except that he doesn't *want* to get well. The strange thing is that he isn't ready to die yet, either. He just lies in that corner and fights. Fights what?" the Mind-man asked helplessly. "He doesn't fight anything. That's the difficult part. He won't accept his condition, but he won't ask for euthanasia. He's a very strange character. How did he ever get into the MI in the first place."

The Capellan said wisely, "That's not uncharacteristic of Earth-men. They're like children, you know—they don't really bow to the inevitable as do most inhabitants of the Fourth Universe. It may be plain enough, but you can't convince them. This fellow will die, still fighting. He's fighting because the hope is still there. They never give up, even in the face of insuperable odds. Coming from your part of the IV Universe," he said thoughtfully, "you find that hard to understand. And so do I, in a way. Earthmen are one of the few entities who have that characteristic of survival so overwhelmingly strong."

The Mind-man said, "Do you have any suggestions?"

"One," said the major. "These Earth-people have a very strong attachment for their own planet—for any place to which they feel they belong. Home—they call it. His own house might be home, or his own city, or continent, or his own galaxy."

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"Very strange," murmured the Mind-man.

"CLOSELY associated with the element of loyalty. He'd fight *us* if we invaded his planet, but he'd fight *for* us if you invaded our Solar System, and he'd fight for you if Thenox, for instance, invaded this metagalaxy. I believe the record shows, in fact, that he was a special agent on Thenox—hence the Centipede's body. Also, he'd turn around and fight for the Hundred and Seventh Metagalaxy if they were invaded by, say, the Third Universe."

"Sort of a soldier of fortune?"

"Decidedly not." The Capellan's limbs were still for an instant. "Quite the opposite. There are some good books on Earth psychology in the library. One especially by Rillattall—if you read Capellan."

"Glad to," murmured the Mind-man. "But you were about to suggest—"

"Let's send this fellow home. That word is magic to an Earth-man. It might do something for him."

And so, two weeks later, Skott Stevens in his centipede body slunk out of the freight-lock on the *Pride of Altair* and took a closed taxi to a small hotel on the outskirts of New York—a place that catered to alien entities, where he could hope to attract little attention. It was about the only thing for which he did hope. He saw Earth-people on the sidewalk stare at him and draw back when he slithered over the door-sill of the taxi, and his fears were confirmed. He didn't dare go out on the street for a walk. He'd stay in his room and have his meals sent up.

If there had been another planet where Centipedes were entities, he would have gone there, but the truth was that there was no world in all the Second Metagalaxy where a centipede-like ruling or sentient race had developed. He was an outcast in his own metagalaxy.

It would have helped a little if he could have known that his work had been useful, but there was no way of finding out a thing like that from MI. And Skott thought skeptically that probably his work was just one of thousands of missions that would be tossed aside, almost as they had shipped him out of the Somatoplastic Hospital.

He didn't go out of the door for a week. But that time he was half-angry. He had a taxi-driver take him to the country for a ride. A few days later he got out of the taxi and took a walk.

The sunshine and fresh air helped him to relax. He began to think that life wouldn't be too bad if he only had a human being to talk to occasionally. During the following week he tried. The only ones who would talk to him were crackpots. The others edged away. He supposed they felt ludicrous, leaning over to talk down to a repulsive, overgrown insect.

A man couldn't live in solitude forever. He decided to see Sheila. She always had been a good listener. He wrote a letter, explaining all that had happened, and his predicament, and asked her to see him.

A week went by without an answer. Skott's bitterness grew at first, but then it gave way to sheer lonesomeness. He didn't try to get in touch with her again, but he thought that if he could just see some of his old friends from a distance it would help.... So that evening he was crawling along on his hundred legs under a hedge, careful to keep his twisting body, eight feet long and as thick as a man's torso, in the shadow.

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THE LIGHTS came on in the garden. Sheila came strolling hand in hand with a man in a Space Patrol uniform. "When are you leaving?" she asked in her old calculating way, and even that made Skott feel warm all over.

"Tomorrow night," the man said.

"Where do you go from here?"

"Scuttlebutt says we're off to find Meenak, wherever that is, but there's nothing ofifcial."

Skott did not mean to show himself, but the mention of Meenak was something he had heard before. Meenak was supposed to be the source of Thenox-VIII's fission material. Skott was interested. He raised his head to see the Space Patrolman more clearly.

He had known he would frighten Sheila if he appeared suddenly, and he had not intended to be seen, but he must have been careless. He heard a scream. He moved—and heard another.

Then there was confusion. Men running heavily, girls screaming in shrill voices. Skott was in the open, running for his life. They cornered him. He ran into a dead-end and was surrounded by a high stone wall. He started up, using the tactile pads on his feet. But a sun-tanned young giant in a bathing suit swung a softball bat against his head and knocked him off of the rocks.

He fell hard, but he picked himself up and squirmed over on his stomach. His ninety-six legs pattered madly. He darted down a path. If he could only find an opening so that he could crawl under the house, or a big rock to slip under. That was it—a rock.

He remembered the granite boulder that Sheila's father had left in the middle of the garden. There had been children digging a cave under it, once long ago, and Skott felt sure he could flatten his body and slip under it long enough to stop pursuit so he could talk to them and tell them who he was.

The bronze young giant was thundering after him, swinging the club.

Skott doubled and skittered heavily through a patch of great cosmos. But his body was too big. The cosmos didn't hide it. He shot across the grass, and a heavy rock struck him in the side. It knocked the last half of his body off of its feet, and he dragged it a few yards before he got it straightened out.

He would have given a lot to have the use of his arms for a moment. He would have taken the club away from the young fellow and thrown it into the bay.

He curved around the corner of the house. A man and a girl were running toward him along the side of the open-air porch. He shot up over the low wall, flattened his body and squeezed in under the railing around the porch. He ran from their screams and yells and his feet slipped on the tile blocks while people converged on the porch from everywhere.

In the middle of the porch he paused. The rock had hit him in a bad spot, and the latter half of his body was getting numb. The side of his head ached where the club had struck. His vision in that eye was getting fuzzy. He saw the front door of the house start to open, and then he knew what to do.

He had to get inside. While he was in the open he had no chance. Inside, perhaps—

HE DARTED for the door. Then he stopped. Cold. For coming out were Sheila and the man. Sheila stared at him and her languid blue eyes bulged. She shrieked.

Skott backed a step. He ignored the

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converging enemies. He looked at Sheila and said as softly as his vox-grid would let him, "Sheila, it's Skott. I'm Skott Stevens. Don't you know me? Please, Sheila, tell them it's me."

He expected her to shout at them to let him alone, but in his anxiety he talked too loud, and his voice was a harsh buzz. Sheila's mouth worked and finally she whispered in horror, "A centipede! Kill it, please."

The young man pulled a pistol from his pocket. Skott pleaded. "Sheila!" But still there was too much intensity in his voice and it didn't sound human.

She showed her loathing. "Kill it," she said to the young man.

The young man pointed the pistol and fired. The bullet cut a gash across Skott's back as he twisted and ran. He went down the low steps, scattering screaming girls before him, and the abruptness of his charge got him in the clear. A few moments later, aching from his wounds, breathless from his flight, and unutterably disillusioned, he peered out from a clump of salt-grass at the edge of the beach and then made his way out onto the sand.

The moon was coming up. His ninety-six legs made a queer twisting track in the sand. There was no place in all the metagalaxy for a man with a Centipede's body. There was no one anywhere for him to talk to. He was only an insect to be exterminated.

Ahead of him, toward the rising moon, he heard odd, rustling footsteps. Many of them, like a large group. But no voices. He dodged to the grass at the upper side of the sand. A moment later, silhouetted in the moonlight, he saw a great Centipede almost as large as himself. For an instant he stared.

His first impulse was to attack it. He thought the Thenoxians had somehow traced him and come for revenge. But there was something different about it. It came slowly, questingly. Then a voice from its vox-grid called, "Skott! Skott Stevens!"

Skott caught his breath. Incredulous, he said something—he didn't know what.

"Don't be alarmed," the voice said. "I've come after you."

There was something hauntingly familiar about the voice, but it defied him. He took a step into the open, and they faced each other. "Don't you remember me?" the voice asked. "Don't you remember the night we stood on this beach and you told me you were going to join the Intelligence?"

He stared at her. "Ann! Ann Bennett!" he whispered.

She laughed softly. "Thanks for remembering."

He couldn't believe it. "How—you—I—"

"I went in too, when you did, or shortly after. Didn't you know?"

"Yes, I—" Then it hit him. "Ann—you went to Thenox. You were the other agent, the one who helped me get away," he said in awe.

"I ASKED for that assignment," she admitted, her eyes watching his. "I wanted to be sure that someone would be there on whom you could depend."

"Well—" He was having trouble breathing oxygen, now. "How did you get away?"

"That's a long story, Skott. I'll tell it to you later. We'll have a lot of time together, because we're the only two Centipedes in the galaxy. That is, unless—maybe you—" She was quite confused. Skott could imagine her blushing.

He looked down at her in the moonlight. Perhaps only a man in his unique position could have seen in her chitin-

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ous body a lovely, soft-curved, black-haired girl.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I've been looking for you, Skott. I wanted to tell you something. I have a message for you from Colonel Jarvg."

His eyes burned into hers. "Yes?"

"He said I should tell you to come back, Skott. They have found out how to nullify the Muir effect, so we can have our own bodies back again."

"How did they work that out?" The answer hit him hard. He broke off.

"I've been in Research for the last year," she said simply, and her mouth moved so that he thought it was a smile. "I was a regular piece of laboratory equipment."

"I guess so," he said wonderingly. "After I ran away, you were one of the few in the Universe they could experiment on. It must have been pretty rough."

She shrugged her full length. "I got paid for it. Anyway, what else was there to do?"

He looked at her with new admiration.

"Colonel Jarvg said I should tell you," she went on, "that the mission to Thenox was eminently successful. They have analyzed the radioactive material as curium, and they are sending an expedition out to locate Meenak. Armed force headquarters on Terebellum sent a message of congratulation to MI headquarters, and there's a medal for you, Skott."

"What about you?" he asked.

She looked at him. "I'll get my reward," she said confidently.

He felt better, now that he knew his work had been useful, but a thought struck him. "If they figured out how to counteract the Muir effect, why haven't they changed you?" he asked sharply.

He could see her swallow. "Suppose they had—and then something unforseen had happened to keep them from changing you. You know how these metaphysical things are. Maybe by the time they could find you it would be too late, and then you would be alone, Skott, the only Centipede in the galaxy." She looked away. "I wanted to be sure you'd have a friend, Skott."

He moved closer. She looked up. He held her as tightly as he could. She sighed gratefully. Then he said, "I'd give a lot for two good arms to put around you, Ann."

She answered dreamily, "I can wait."

THE END

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THE INNKEEPER OF MARS

By Dex R. Moore

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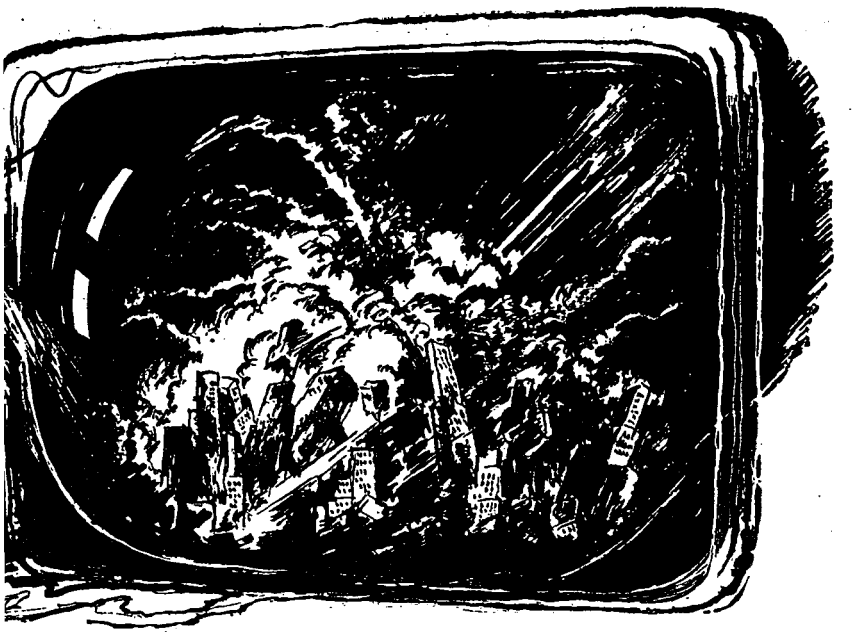

This strange innkeeper was brimming over with hospitality. He could persuade every Terran to remain on Mars forever. But his methods were, to say the least, unique

THE SETTING sun, sliding toward the dust-dimmed horizon of the red Martian desert, pushed before it shadows lance-tipped with cold. Five earth men, prodded by this swift, chilling advance of night, moved nervously from the shadow of their rocket ship. They gathered in an excited, feet-shuffling circle, leaning slightly toward the last faint rays of the distant sun.

A block-shouldered, darkly handsome young man known as "Smitty", the commander of the Space Ship *Virgin Star*, paced steps away from the group. He moved slowly and deliberately, masking his blood-burning excitement behind a thoughtful frown and studied movement. The men were unstable now as an overheated engine pump. Smitty would have to hold them down.

He knew how to hold them, too. Ceremony, give them ceremony, he thought. Good for the nerves. And what better time or opportunity for ceremony. Neatly he assembled shining metal sections of a fourteen-foot flagstaff. Precisely he unfurled silken folds of stars and stripes.

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As he worked he soaked up the frosty silence of desert dusk around him. When his men spoke, rarely, among themselves, he heard the whispers as if they were shoutings in a tile tunnel. He heard the words splinter away into the thin air. But the thoughts never touched him. Smitty was far too conscious of his very real importance, of the moment of their presence there on Mars, to know any thought, or any emotion other than triumph. Triumph swirling hot through the blood flushing his face.

Dackman, co-pilot and mineralogical expert, nudged a thin elbow into the ribs of the man beside him.

"Leave it to the Old Man to make a show of it!" Dackman whispered.

Porter, the engineer, grinned tightly, answered through barely opened, faintly cold-bluing lips. "And why not? The greatest show on earth—off earth, rather. The first men to conquer space! If that's not worth a show—" He stopped whispering. Smitty's consciousness had reached out and seized upon them again, held them, willingly enough, vise-like.

Smitty spoke solemnly, his short, stiff black moustache quivering, excitement pitching his voice high. "In the sight of God and these assembled witnesses I hearby claim this planet of Mars as a possession of the United States of America!"

With a powerful jab he thrust the spiked end of the flagstaff into rocky ground. The rod struck sparks and tilted sideways. Two men leaped forward and prodded it more solidly between reddish-brown stones.

FOR A TENSE moment of brittle silence the five Americans stared at each other. Calwell broke first. The chemist's long jaw dropped and from his small mouth came a big yell.

"Yip-yip-yipeee!" he howled. The sound went rabbit-hopping off among the rockpile hills of the desert. And as if suddenly uncorked, all the earth men yelled their throats raw and did savage-like dances. They had conquered space—landed on Mars. The first men on Mars.

Smitty calmed first. He was their leader, and must set the example. Straining to see out into the star-flecked night Smitty felt suddenly lonely, almost afraid. The burden of responsibility settled in a small lump in the bottom of his heart.

They traveled on foot then, exploring a circle of a mile around their ship. Lacking patience to wait till daylight, they stumbled about the tumbled terrain. Striking about them with powerful beams of light, the men called gleefully to each other at every discovery of a strange plant, or when a peculiar animal scurried across the range of their lights.

They were like boys, Smitty thought. Like boys playing at exploring in the woods. But it was hard to call them down. What danger, after all, could they encounter in this desolate, barren section of a world perhaps long dead? They were all heavily armed, trained soldiers as well as scientists. But a wary eye, even so, thought Smitty. Preparedness—

But even Smitty was unprepared when the attack came. The group paused on a high rocky rim. They stood silent, breath coming in quick puffs of vapor. Smitty adjusted the heating unit of his flying suit to warm him more. He relaxed his constant surveillance of the land around him for a moment, to set the thermostat. And in that moment the Martians attacked.

Rock clusters and boulders sprouted Martians in twos and threes; crevices and cracks spewed uniformed soldiers wearing rib-tubed masks and wielding

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oval-barreled, cumbersome weapons. In an instant the earth men were surrounded by menacing figures.

Smitty loosed his sidearm from its holster and triggered flame and steel toward the nearest Martian. The soldier doubled in the middle, as if folding across a wire. Then from the barrel-shaped muzzles of the awkward Martian weapons feathered white streamers of vapor. The strange gas enveloped the earth men briefly, faded as swiftly as it came, and the battle was over.

Smitty awoke to the sound of voices. "He's coming around now. Give him a pot of *vron* and he'll be all right. A strong one, he is—the others will be out for a while yet."

Smitty's first thought was "where am I?" But he choked it back. Instead he opened his eyes to slits and looked to the sound of the voice.

THE BEING lolling at the round table reminded Smitty of something he had seen long ago in a nursery-rhyme book. A picture of a huge man who was said to eat ten cattle and several sheep and pigs at a meal, just for appetizers. The being Smitty stared at now sat bulging over the sides of an outsized chair. He was unbelievably fat, a moving, living hill of rolling flesh and brick-red skin. But for all his size and weight he moved his arms in swift, graceful motions over a game board on the table before him.

Smitty sat slowly, and silently, stared around the room wonderingly. Then he remembered the climax of the brief battle. The Martians must have loosed some sort of sleeping gas on them.

The gross red man swiveled his enormous head to peer at Smitty. He smiled, a slow, unwieldly lifting of many wrinkles of mouth. "Ah! Welcome, Captain Smith, welcome to the Desert Inn!"

"Who are you?" Smitty demanded beligerently. "Where are my men? Who brought us here?"

The massive chest of the huge red man quivered with deep laughter. He moved a bone marker on the game board before answering. When he spoke he addressed others in the room, rather than Smitty. "Always the impatience! What is it about space travel that makes men so impatient, can you gentlemen tell me?"

A ripple of laughter spread through the room. For the first time Smitty became aware of other men, and other beings. Became aware of the vast room around him, of murmuring talk, the clack of bone markers on game boards, the whisper of shuffled cards. He felt warmth from a fire snapping resentfully at cold trying to creep through the walls.

The room loomed enormous before Smitty—vast in its proportions, scaled to the hulk of the red man. But it was comfortable-looking, homey. A fire muttered and snapped in an open fireplace of azure stone. Wide chairs of soft saffron leather promised deep comfort. All the pleasures of home, and more, like the short bar. Two men in robes and cowls of monk's cloth lounged at the yellowed wood counter sipping from flat glasses and regarding Smitty curiously.

"Where are my men?" Smitty demanded again, bringing his attention back to the gross red man.

"They are perfectly well," he assured Smitty in a kindly tone. "Sleeping longer from the effects of the gas, is all. They will be brought downstairs when they recover.

"Now let me introduce myself and serve you a pot of *vron*, eh? I am

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known as Brevy, the Innkeeper of Mars." He moved from his chair, surprisingly agile for his bulk. From a copper brazier he took a round-bellied pot of metal-blended azure and emerald and gold from the fires of countless years.

After drinking a full pot of the strong, bitter tea, Smitty felt strength warming his muscles again. Confidence came sallying hesitantly back from hiding.

"We are prisoners here?" Smitty asked cautiously.

"Not at all," the Innkeeper assured him jovially. "Of course you will be restrained from leaving for the first day and night. A period of orientation, you see. After that—" the Innkeeper smiled, a grotesque and yet friendly expansion of his wide mouth. "But no one ever leaves," he said finally.

SMITTY remained silent, pondering. Captured and brought here by force, but they weren't prisoners. Of course no one ever left, but they weren't prisoners. Now that made real sense!

"Tell me how you came here, to Mars, I mean, eh?" the Innkeeper said, genuine interest in his voice.

"In the Space Ship *Virgin Star*," Smitty said, pride strong in his voice.

The Innkeeper smiled, then chuckled. "The first rocket ship from Earth—well, how technology does advance. Another hundred years, perhaps, and we will be forced to adopt new defenses."

Smitty grunted noncommittally. Double-talk. Let him rave on. Meanwhile Smitty would be taking in the details, and figuring for an escape. From here it looked easy. But Smitty had long ago learned to beware of appearances. He would be cautious, but he had to find a way out for his men. A way back to their ship.

The circle of strange men gathered around did nothing to raise Smitty's confidence. There was an acetic-faced little Englishman Brevy addressed as Carlyle. The two cowled men, one of them wearing a beard that must have been frizzled white and tobacco-stained when Methuselah was a lad. Three otter-like men crowded near the circle, and a giant Greek-god type swaggered in from a corner to peer at him.

Smitty backed away and found a chair by himself in the corner. He had to be alone awhile, to think.

Hours later the men of Smitty's crew had recovered and were led shakily down the spiral flight of yellow wood stairs. They ate ravenously, and drank deep of the steaming, bitter, but refreshing *vron*.

Smitty left his men huddled at a table in a corner of the great room and peered out a low, wide window. Dusk was spilling over the tops of faraway hills in the west. Shadows of pacing Martian sentries cast long shadows angling up the walls of the Inn.

"Not prisoners," Smitty grumbled to himself.

He turned at the touch of a hand on his shoulder. The sour-mouthed little Englishman was striving to form a smile. Smitty turned slowly toward him, gesturing mutely with a thumb towards the outside.

"Oh, the guards," Carlyle said casually. "They'll pull out tomorrow and we can walk outside again."

"Yes?" Smitty demanded sarcastically. "Then what? A moat surrounding the castle, perhaps? Or do they have secret rays, like in the comics back home?"

THE ENGLISHMAN raised his eyebrows in a silent question. "Oh—I see what you mean," he said after a

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time. "You're still thinking about escape, of course."

"Of course," Smitty agreed, mimicking the brittle voice.

"You could leave any time after the orientation period," Carlyle assured him solemnly. "But you won't want to. Nothing to stop you, though, you know. Nothing physical, except the desert, and the fact that there is nowhere to go—no reason to leave."

"If you think I'm going to stay here," Smitty spoke vehemently. "If you think I'm going to let my men stay cooped up here, prisoners for the rest of—" Smitty let the sentence die unfinished. Brevy, Innkeeper of Mars, approached him with a rolling but silent gait.

"Gentlemen," Brevy greeted them cheerily. "Having an earnest little talk, eh? Has Captain Smith been regaling you with his plans to escape, eh?" Brevy jabbed a ham-like elbow into Carlyle's ribs and laughed till Smitty thought the big red man would choke.

"Yes, I have," Smitty admitted quietly. "I intend to get out of here with y men as soon as we can. And God lp anyone who gets in our way when e get ready to leave!"

Brevy laughed again. "Really, Captain, I assure you that no one will try to stop you. But wait until after the movies tonight, won't you?"

"Movies?" Smitty said, surprised.

"Of course," Brevy agreed jovially. "We always have movies when new men come here. We find it very entertaining—and informative."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Smitty grumbled.

"Of course not, of course not!" cried Brevy jovially. "But you will. He will, eh, Carlyle?" Again he laughed quiveringly. Then his mood changed suddenly. "Tell me, Captain. Why did you come to Mars? That is, why did you risk the journey, the peril. the unknown?" He peered at Smitty, solemn inquiring with his eyes.

"Why?" Smitty echoed, perplexed. "Why, for centuries man has striven to conquer space! For centuries it has been the dream of men, of all ages, of all cultures. To fly off to the stars, to conquer the vast reaches of the cosmos, to widen the horizon and the frontier of science and knowledge, to —to—" Smitty paused to search out a phrase worthy of the thought. He forgot the search when he saw Brevy and Carlyle smiling sadly at each other. "What's so amusing?" Smitty demanded.

Brevy spoke solemnly again. "Captain Smith, I have been here, serving in the role of Innkeeper of Mars for —well for more time than has been recorded on some of the planets. It seems I have always been here.

"Through the ages men come here." He lifted an arm and pointed in a sweeping arc around the huge room. "Look. As you say, men from all ages, men from all cultures, men from all planets. They come to Mars, they are brought here, they remain..."

"I don't understand," Smitty said, deeply puzzled.

"You will—" Brevy said slowly. "You see, here on Mars we have lived past the peak of our civilization. Our culture was ancient when Atlantis, on your Earth, was born. We have been abroad in the universe. And we have returned, having learned the lessons taught by the vastness of space. The lessons of humility, and love of our home.

"We want no invasion here, Captain Smith. And we have no real arms, now, to fight it off. But we have our quiet ways. As the men come here in their various manners—by black magic, by teleportation, by rocket—we bring them here. And after they see the

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truth they stay here, and live on with us in peace, never wanting to leave. And, never leaving, they slow the progress of their followers. I imagine it will be years before a rocket comes from earth again, Captain. Eventually, I suppose, we will have to resort to different methods. But—"

"Well, you won't keep us here," Smitty said matter-of-factly.

"Please—" Brevy said, holding up a wide palm to request silence. "Please—wait until after the movies tonight."

"Yeah, we'll wait," Smitty agreed, turning to watch the pacing shadows of the sentries outside.

AFTER THE evening meal, served with much ceremony to celebrate the arrival of the newcomers, everyone gathered for the "movies." There were more than thirty men in all, over half of them earth-men of various ages and eras. The others were from all planets of the Solar System except Mercury and Pluto.

They all drew up chairs in the main room of the Inn, and Brevy darkened the lights. Smitty watched the proceedings with a tolerant smile until Brevy approached him. In his hands the Innkeeper held a metallic, dome-like cap to which were attached three strands of golden wires.

"Will you honor us, Captain Smith?" Brevy asked politely.

"Do what?" Smitty drew back in surprise.

"The movies," Brevy explained patiently. "You see, we draw our pictures from the subconscious minds of our guests—"

"How's that?" Smitty demanded suspiciously.

"This little cap," Brevy said. "It picks up the subconscious thoughts, dreams, fears of the wearer and projects them on a screen where we all can view them."

"Like movies," Smitty said, beginning to understand.

"Like movies," Brevy agreed. "From them we will learn why you left Earth, perhaps."

"We left earth in the interest of Science," Smitty answered seriously.

"True enough," Brevy agreed. "But—"

"We have conquered space," Smitty interrupted proudly. "We are the first to span the distance in a rocket ship—that is—well, we thought we were," Smitty amended, looking at the collection of men in the darkened room.

"All men think they span space to conquer new horizons," Brevy said soothingly. "But have you ever considered that they—that you—were *afraid?*"

"We were all afraid, I guess," Smitty admitted. "But we came anyway."

"You came anyway, yes. Always there is some fear driving men on in spite of fear. Some fear so finely transmuted, so deeply hidden that it manifests itself as—the spirit of adventure. In Carlyle's time, there, it was magic, demons. In your time, what?"

"I—I don't know what you're talking about!" Smitty declared truthfully.

"On with the movies, then," Brevy said cheerily. He fitted the metal cap onto Smitty's head, who submitted reluctantly but silently.

Brevy made adjustments on a machine in the back of the room, and soon silent moving pictures appeared on a screen for all to see.

IT WAS a strange montage that showed first. A blur of parades, bands and banners on sunny afternoons, brief glimpses of conferences in secret rooms, then the take-off of the rocket *Virgin Star* that had brought them to Mars.

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Then the montage faded and pictures came in orderly sequence. The chambers of the United Nations appeared, a huge room astir with frantic activity. A hard-featured, square faced man was delivering an apparently bitter harrangue into a microphone. The picture faded, and after a brief period of blackness reappeared focused on a group of men angrily stuffing documents into brief-cases.

"The American delegation!" Smitty whispered, recognizing the faces of the men.

The American delegation stalked out of the United Nations Building and the picture faded out as their backs disappeared into whirling streaks of snow.

High in the stratosphere the picture found gigantic missiles sweeping across the Atlantic. Each missile was a hundred feet long, each a rocket carrying a warhead...

A map of the United States appeared, as seen from one hundred miles high. The rockets nosed down, scattered, and took varying trails. Suddenly New York City reeled under the tremendous blow of the atomic rocket bomb, a pall of smoke mushroomed up toward the trails of other rockets destined for Washington, D.C., for Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago—

"No!" Smitty whispered hoarsely. "No, they can't—they can't! We're not ready—" He stood up suddenly, tore the cap from his head. Clutching the metal dome he stood rod-straight, staring at the Innkeeper. Brevy's talk of fears driving men to conquest whirled in his mind. Doubt began casting pale shadows on his self-assuredness.

Then Captain Steven Smith gave his last official order. "Porter, you try it," Smitty directed.

Porter donned the metal cap. Once again the room darkened, and again pictures flashed on the screen.

The sequence differed slightly from the pictures drawn from Smitty's mind. But the end result was the same. The "movies" ended with scenes of devastating atomic warfare ravaging America.

SMITTY sat erect, motionless, in the hushed, darkened room. He felt alone and helpless, as if protective walls had crumbled around him. Finally he turned toward Brevy again. "That—that is what our fears are, you believe?" Smitty asked, reaching blindly to find his old self-assurance.

"Men's fears change with changing times," Brevy said solemnly. "But always it drives them on toward far horizons."

"So we've run away from it all," Smitty said, bitterness creeping into his voice. "You hear that, men? We couldn't take it, so we ran away from home!"

Shuffled feet, a cleared throat, nervous laughter answered him.

Smitty looked around the huge room once again. "Well—we're here. Let's make ourselves comfortable while we think it over." Smitty walked slowly away from the group and sat by the fire. He sat silent and alone for the rest of the night, trying to fit Brevy's strange philosophy into the shattered pattern of his world.

Smitty had lost track of time, as such, when the newcomers arrived. The language changed automatically, by telepathic means, to a dialect spoken in China.

"A new group of daring space-voyageurs," Smitty thought bitterly.

The young Chinese rocket commander sought Smitty out and engaged him in a game of Martian chess. "You look like an active one," the Chinese said. "Together I believe we can es-

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cape from this place."

"Escape?" Smitty said resignedly. A distant look came into his eyes. "Oh, yes. You're still thinking about escape, of course."

"Of course," the Chinese agreed with exaggerated patience.

"You could leave any time after the orientation period," Smitty assured him solemnly. "But you won't want to. There is no place to go. No reason to leave."

"Really," the Chinese said dryly.

"Sure," Smitty said cheerfully. "You can 'escape'. But wait a while—wait until after the movies tonight."

THE END

(Continued from page 37

Atwell's men out. They didn't mind at all. They were only doing a job and they were paid for it, and now that their leader's plans had backfired, they wanted no part of the ship and its crew.

They were in space again. The starmen were singing, O'Keef and Larkin and Jenkins and Finer—the whole rollicking crew of them—a hundred men and a girl, blasting off for the stars again.

O'Keef's baritone was louder than the other voices, and Kenton could hardly hear Wilton as the little man spoke. "When we reach the range of the monitors, I will contact them. I am expected and we can get through. There will be a lot to do, Kenton. A lot to do."

"Yes," Kenton said.

"We must go out and show the galaxy that earth is ready now. And in time we will return for the rest of the starmen. In time. In a century or two, perhaps earth's billions can be taught to go into space again."

"Yes," Valerie said.

"Yes," Kenton said absently. "But it's a long way to Antares, too. A long way, and I hardly know my wife."

"Yes," said Valerie, and she took Kenton's hand and they walked down the companionway together....

THE END

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VAMPIRE of the DEEP

By Roq Phillips

When he drew in his net he hoped for a startling catch—but snared a living girl who strangely had been dead for days!

"DR. FRANK Richards?" Frank turned in the direction of the voice. The man who had spoken was short, rather timid looking. Hardly the type he had expected to see in a small town general practitioner, entirely out of character with his voice which was low and cultured.

"Yes," he said cheerfully. "You're Dr. Nelson, I take it."

"That's right," Dr. Nelson said. "Here. I'll take one of your bags."

"No, that's all right," Frank said hastily. "I prefer to carry them both. They make a better balanced load. Which way's your car?"

He followed Dr. Nelson through the crowded waiting room of the railroad depot. Outside a police sedan was at the curb, two uniformed men sitting in the front seat.

"We're taking the prowl car," Dr. Nelson said. "Oscar Freeman insisted, so I left my own car parked down at the station. We'll go over to the hotel first so you can check in and maybe freshen up a bit. After lunch we can go down and talk to Oscar. He can tell you more about Jack Sprout than I gave you in my letter."

"I had lunch on the train," Frank said. "If you don't mind I'd much rather go down now. My practice in New York is pretty demanding at present. I don't want to stay away longer than necessary."

"All right," Dr. Nelson said.

They got into the car.

"I wouldn't have thought of calling you about Jack Sprout," Dr. Nelson said as the car got under way, siren screaming importantly, "except that I felt this thing was right in your line. I've read your book on the symbology of the psychopathic escape from reality. A couple of your other books, too."

"That's good, doctor," Frank said. "I suppose you've given this Oscar Freeman a sketch of my background so that I won't have to waste any time on salesmanship."

"He's eager to give you a free hand in whatever you do," Dr. Nelson said. "Small town police chief calls in famous New York specialist sort of thing. The buttons popped off his vest when he learned you had consented to come."

Frank smiled at the ramrod stiff necks of the two men in the front seat. Nazi stormtroopers couldn't have looked more military in the days of Hitler, and that siren could be heard beyond the city limits in every direction. Perhaps even out to the three mile limit at sea.

"Offhand I'm not so much interested in solving the murder as I am

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in the mind of Jack Sprout," he said. "I gather from your letter that you and Freeman want me to get below the symbolism in his ravings and get him to confess. If I do that it will be only incidental to the study of the symbolism itself. Oscar Freeman might be disappointed in the results."

"I doubt if that would matter too much," Dr. Nelson said. "Up until this happened Jack Sprout was a very well liked young fisherman. Frieda Thorne—well, I don't think Oscar knows what she looked like. I have a sneaking hunch that if you could hand down some authoritative opinion that Jack Sprout was innocent Oscar would be more pleased than if you solved the murder. He'd be passing the buck to you, if you get what I mean."

The car drew up in front of a building made of dirty blocks of stone the same size as modern cinder blocks. It was a typical police station in a typical small town. Built at the same time as the railroad station way back when.

One of the men in the front seat leaped out and opened the rear door, holding it open importantly. Frank climbed out followed by Dr. Nelson. Frank started to take his two bags out of the car.

"Leave them in, doctor," the officer said respectfully. "We'll take them to the hotel and be right back. Only a minute."

"Thanks," Frank said.

HE FOLLOWED Dr. Nelson into the building, across a creaking, much varnished floor, through a couple of doors, and through a third door on which had been lettered quite ornately the legend, "Oscar Freeman, Chief of Police."

Frank received his second surprise. Oscar Freeman was not the rather oldish potbellied self-important character he had envisioned, but an instantly likeable and cleanly built man not over thirty. When they entered he stood up and came around his desk, holding out a hand in welcome.

Frank reached out to shake hands, felt something was wrong. He looked down at the hand he was shaking. It was a left hand. He looked at Oscar's right arm and saw that it ended with a curved hook instead of a hand.

"Lost it in the war," Oscar said pleasantly.

"If you two don't mind," Dr. Nelson said, "I'll run along. Couple of hospital cases I should look at before office hours. You can call me. Otherwise I'll drop over to the hotel this evening, Dr. Richards."

"WHAT DO you want first, doctor?" Oscar asked when the door closed. "See Jack? Or would you like all the dope on the case up to date?"

"The latter would be best, I think," Frank said. "The slant of a third party is often valuable."

He took a chair and lit a cigarette, settling back comfortably.

"Well," the police chief began, "it all began a week ago. We have a big tourist trade here. Three hotels with a total of a hundred and fifty rooms, and most of them filled during six months of the year. I can't keep track of all the tourists, naturally. I do remember noticing this girl, Frieda Thorne, however. Just one in the crowd in the lobby at the Cove Arms. A striking beauty of a type you seldom see. Skin satiny smooth, so smooth it almost seems it can't have any pores, yet with a healthy color. Lips the same way. Rather full but not too much so, and with the same satiny smooth texture. Lipstick that you would have sworn was a natural unpainted color. And maybe it was. Eyes maybe a little too large

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for a normal person but just exactly right for her. I thought, 'Boy, that could be for me!' Then I promptly forgot about her. You know how it is, especially with a single man. You see a dozen every week you could fall in love with and marry, given half a chance." He looked down at the hook at the end of his right arm. "But you don't do anything about it. Especially here. They'd turn out to be married, or in love with another guy already, and anyway they'd all be accustomed to living on an income you could never hope to earn enough to pay the income tax on even.

"But I did ask the clerk what room she was in. That's how I know it was her."

"Dr. Nelson said you hadn't seen her," Frank said.

"You're the only one who knows I did except that room clerk and he probably forgot about it," Oscar said. "Anyway, it was two days later that she disappeared. It was an elderly woman who reported her missing. Claimed to be a very dear friend of Miss Thorne's, but I suspect she's just a casual hotel acquaintance of the type that instantly becomes your lifelong friend. You know the type. But she spread it on thick enough so that the hotel took a look in her room and found her clothes all there and the bed unslept in. That was good enough. They called me.

"Well," Oscar continued, "I figured no self respecting girl with a nice body would come to a resort town without a bathing suit, so I looked for one. It was missing. That made it slip into a neat pattern. Girl goes swimming, maybe alone, and drowns. Girl goes bathing, meets with foul play. Corpse lying somewhere along the beach. I send my boys and a couple dozen volunteers up and down the beach for several miles. Within an hour we locate the spot where her swim suit and beach robe and sandals are laying in a neat pile. At first there seems no sign of foul play. Even though the spot is very secluded. It's the kind of a place a girl wanting to take a quick dip in the nude would pick.

"It isn't until I bring the stuff down here that I begin to suspect foul play. Here, I'll bring it out and you can discover for yourself."

Oscar got up and crossed to a safe. He brought out a bundle in a cellophane bag. He dropped it in Frank's lap and went over and sat down again, watching him with a half smile.

Frank stared at the bag. Inside was a folded two piece swim suit and a bath towel type of beach robe. He looked up at Oscar questioningly, then slid open the zipper. Immediately his eyes widened.

"It smells strongly of fish!" he said.

"I thought you'd notice," Oscar said with satisfaction. "And it wouldn't do that if she had just taken a dip and it had dried out. The only way it could get that strong a smell of fish is if it had been soaked in the bilge water of a fishing boat! And it would take several washings to get it out."

"I see," Frank said slowly. "And I can see how you concluded it must be foul play. And obviously if it were, her things could have been washed out and dropped in that secluded spot to make it seem she had taken a dip in the nude and been pulled out to sea by the tide. It would be the logical pattern for a fisherman who found himself getting into trouble that demanded he silence the girl. In itself probably foolproof."

"LOTS OF murders are foolproof if the initial setup is left alone," Oscar said. "The murderer has a conscience that bothers him, or he thinks the police suspect too much

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and makes further moves to cover up imagined loopholes, and gets caught. I and my boys made a routine check-up of all the local fishing boats over the next two or three days, looking for signs of a struggle, or blood, or even a corpse, though we didn't expect to find one. No dice. We gave it up as a bad job. There were a couple of fishermen we could have brought in on suspicion to make a case and let the people know we're on the job. But hell, why bother?"

"Then Jack Sprout goes to pieces?" The police chief nodded agreement.

"I was waiting for that," Frank said, leaning forward and grinding out his cigarette. "Let me know as much as you can remember of how he looked and what he actually said."

"When we were looking over the boats Jack Sprout's boat was O.K.," Oscar said. "When I asked him the routine question of whether he had known the girl he readily admitted that she had gone out on a fishing trip with him about ten days before she had disappeared. He wouldn't admit to anything more than that. Claimed he hadn't seen her the day she vanished. But he was the only one of the fishermen who admitted even knowing her. I took it on myself to sort of circulate around during off-duty hours, seeing what I could pick up.

"It was Jeb Turner, the bartender down at the waterfront bar that gave me my first lead. He said that Jack Sprout had come in there one evening and started drinking pretty heavily. He ran out of money and hit Jeb up for credit so he could go on drinking. When Jeb asked him what had come over him that he wanted to get drunk like that Jack told him he had seen something out at sea. He muttered something about a girl in his nets. Jeb laughed about it and gave him credit, thinking Jack had just cooked up a whopper as an excuse for getting himself good and tight.

"That was enough to bring him in for questioning. At first we couldn't get anything out of him. I decided I could do better by getting him drunk again. I released him and invited him to have a drink with me. We went down to the waterfront bar. I kept pushing drinks on him until he was pretty drunk. He was so drunk he could barely stay on the stool before he started talking. His story was rather weird.

"He said he hadn't even known Frieda was missing when he pulled in his net and saw her. She didn't have a stitch on, and was astride the back of the biggest old flounder he had ever seen. She got off its back and climbed aboard. Then she sort of doubled up, pressing her hands against her stomach. Water came out of her nose and mouth in a steady stream, then spurts. Finally she straightened up, breathing in deep gulps like a fish out of water. A couple of minutes of that and her breathing became normal. Then she bawled him out good for catching her and Bullza in his net. He said he apologized and turned over the net, releasing the big fish and all the rest of the catch. Then without a backward glance Frieda dived in. He watched where she disappeared, and shortly a lot of bubbles broke to the surface. The big fish had been swimming around near the surface. After the bubbles stopped it went down out of sight.

"Jack ran into the cabin and brought out his waterscope. That's a piece of stovepipe with a glass in one end. You stick it in the water and you can see right on down. Through that he claims he saw Frieda swim to the back of the flounder and get on. Then they swam away."

Oscar smiled smugly.

"I brought him back to the station

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and booked him for being drunk," he said. He became serious again. "I didn't want to book him on suspicion of murder. In a small town that's bad. If you get off people keep on thinking you were guilty."

He stopped talking, watching Dr. Frank Richards expectantly.

"On the theory that Jack was too drunk to think up the story," Frank said thoughtfully, "I can see why Dr. Nelson thought it would interest me. He sensed a basic picture of this Jack Sprout falling in love with Frieda Thorne, being spurned, perhaps laughed at by this superior city girl who considered him just an ignorant fisherman, killing her in a fit of anger and humiliation, shoving the deed into his subconscious where even he can't pull it out, then rationalizing it with a fantastic dream. A dream he might very likely have had the next time he slept after killing her. It's a rather conventional pattern. Murder. The refusal of the conscious mind to accept the fact of murder. Shoving it into the subconscious and walling it in with symbolism. I think I would like to talk with him now."

JACK SPROUT was dressed in water repellent levis, heavy shoes, and a brown woolen shirt open at the neck; all showing signs of wear. His face, neck, and bare arms had the kind of tan a fisherman gets in his open boat under the sun with salt breezes whipping at him. His face was thin, the thinness accentuated by the heavy thatch of black hair that spilled over, covering his ears and seeming never to have known any other comb than the careless fingers its owner ran through it to get it back from his eyes.

He looked at Frank without curiosity, then turned to Oscar.

"That was a dirty trick, Oscar," he said. "Getting me drunk and locking me up for being drunk."

"I wanted you where I could find you, Jack," Oscar said, grinning. "This is Dr. Richards. Otherwise known as Frank. He's interested in what you said about seeing Frieda with that fish."

Jack glanced at Frank again, dismissed him with his eyes, then turned his attention back to the police chief.

"Are you turning me loose, Oscar?" he said. "You'd better. There's a storm brewing. I've got to make my boat secure."

"That's up to Frank," Oscar said. "He's the boss here. Came down from New York. What he says goes. If he says lock you up again and keep you there till you rot," he shrugged his shoulders resignedly, "I'll have to do it. If he says turn you loose I'll have to do that. Better be nice to him."

Jack Sprout turned back to Frank with new interest in his eyes. He studied him from under his heavy black eyebrows He turned back to Oscar.

"So that's the way it is, huh?" he said. "You think I'm crazy. Well I'm not. I know what I saw and heard." He turned back to Frank with a sneer twisting at his lips. "But if your idea of being crazy is anyone who sees something nobody else has ever seen, then I'm crazy according to you, and you'll order me locked up for the rest of my life, I guess."

"Not at all," Frank said. "As a matter of fact, I don't think you are crazy."

"Huh?" Jack said, startled.

Frank smiled disarmingly. "I'm more interested in what you saw," he said. "I write books about unusual things like that. Things that sound so crazy sometimes the one who saw them gets locked up because everyone thinks he really is crazy. You might say I'm just the opposite of the doctors that lock people up. There

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are quite a few people running around loose right this minute that would still be behind bars in some state hospital if I hadn't stepped in and investigated what they claimed to have seen or heard."

"And if I don't talk about it?" Jack asked.

"I hope you will," Frank said. "I'd like to meet Frieda Thorne and her fish. Personally I've always thought fish were a lot smarter than most people believe. I don't see anything fantastic in a fish being almost intelligent when it's as old and has been through as much as this one seems to have been."

JACK STARED at him, his expression slowly altering from contempt and defiance to hope and reserved friendliness.

"You *talk* sense," he admitted. "If Oscar'll turn me loose we can go out and look around. I don't think Frieda will come back, but we can look."

"Why don't you think she'll come back?" Frank asked casually.

"Well, she's mad at me because she got caught in my net," Jack said. "And she didn't like me, really. It was just that I had a boat and could take her outside the bay. It wasn't even the same as ordinary tourists. They look at you like you're a character, but human, just the same as they are. She looked at me like, well, like Mrs. Grant, the rich lady, does. Like I belong to some other race. Dogs maybe."

"You mean when you took her out this last time?" Frank asked.

"I only took her out the once," Jack said. "That was two weeks ago. And that's when I'm talking about. She wanted to hire me to take her out. I wouldn't take any money. I was going out fishing anyway, and she came along."

"Alone?" Frank asked.

"Yes," Jack said.

"What'd she do when you kissed her," Frank said, smiling. "Slap you?"

"I didn't try nothing like that," Jack Sprout said. But his face turned a deep red. Realizing this he broke down. "All right," he said sullenly. "So I tried to get fresh with her. What would you have done, when she climbed out of the water, with it dripping from her, without any clothes on?"

"The same thing, probably," Frank said, laughing. "And if she spurned me I'd probably dream about her and think about her, and wind up wanting her more than anything else on earth. That's the way those things usually work out."

"But that's what caused the trouble," Jack said, his mood changing. "She wasn't mad at me for trying to get fresh with her. She might have let me. She was teasing me, running around the boat. But when I caught her—" He clamped his mouth shut.

"She didn't have anything on when this happened?" Frank said. "She was asking for trouble."

"That's just it," Jack said, shifting uncomfortably. "She wanted me to get fresh with her. It was when I wouldn't that she—" A peculiar expression crossed his face. "She wasn't human. I felt it. I left her there on the foredeck and headed back toward shore. That's what made her mad."

Oscar cleared his throat. "I'm sending you back to clink for now, Jack," he said. "The doc and I will talk, and if he thinks it's OK I'll release you later in the day."

Frank opened his mouth, then closed it. He saw that Oscar had something on his mind.

Oscar had pressed a button on his desk. A policeman came in. Oscar nodded toward Jack, and watched while the fisherman was led away. When the door closed he turned to

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talk to the city doctor.

"I think that's the slip I've been waiting for," he said. "Jack's boat doesn't have a foredeck. Just an open hold where the fish can be poured in from the nets."

"Then you think he left her lying in the hold?" Frank said.

"In about two feet of stagnant water," Oscar said, "strong with the smell of dead fish. These fishermen seldom clean that out thoroughly. I think he was talking about the last time she went out with him. I think that's when he killed her because she insisted in flaunting her body before him and fought him off. He killed her, left her in the hold for at least a day while he cooked up a plan to get clear. When he got the idea of leaving her swim suit and robe on the beach he took it off her and dropped her at sea."

"What would be the chances of her body being washed up on shore?" Frank asked.

"Practically nil if an experienced fisherman dropped her off shore," Oscar said. "He'd know the currents and drop her where she'd go on out to sea. "That's why Dr. Nelson suggested interesting you in the case. The only way we have of solving the thing short of finding the body is to break Jack down. And you're the only one who can do that." The phone had rung while he was talking. He scooped it up now. "Yeah?" he grunted. He listened a moment, his eyes going wide. "They've found the body," he said to Frank. "Over on Crab Point."

"WE'LL PICK up Dr. Nelson," Oscar said. "He acts as coroner whenever there's any coronering to be done." He grinned widely at his own wisecrack.

After a ten minute wait at Dr. Nelson's office they got started, taking a dirt road that bounced over scabrock as it skirted the bay toward Crab Point, a neck of uninviting rocky beach jutting out from the mainland to extend better than halfway across the inner harbor, and acting as a breakwater.

Oscar was in high spirits. "This is going to wrap up this case in a hurry," he said to Dr. Nelson after explaining about finding the body.

"I wouldn't be too sure," Frank said.

"What do you mean?" Oscar said. "What more can we ask? The body, the man who did it, and just about enough evidence to prove he did it—with your expert testimony, of course."

"You saw Jack Sprout?" Dr. Nelson asked.

"I saw him, doctor," Frank said.

"Was he as interesting a case as I thought he would be?" Dr. Nelson asked.

Interesting, yes," Frank said.

The police car left the road and bounced violently over the rough beach toward the shore where another police car and a small group of people were gathered. It bounced to a stop beside the other car.

Oscar opened the door. They got out and went the remaining few yards to the shore. There was a brown blanket spread out over something, just a few feet away from the hungrily reaching waves that washed up. It was a nice day. The air was barely moving. The waves came along toward shore in rolling waves that came up without breaking into whitecaps, thinned out as they went onto the beach, and lingered before slowly going back.

"Foul play all right, chief," one of the police said importantly. He went to the blanket and lifted it enough to reveal the head.

"God!" Oscar muttered, staring at

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the crushed skull. "He must have struck her a dozen times to batter in her brains like that."

Dr. Nelson bent down and peered at the ugly wound. Bits of brain matter were mixed with hair and bone, all washed clean of blood by long immersion in water.

"How long would you say she's been dead?" Oscar asked.

"Can't say until we take her down to the morgue and I give the body a thorough examination," Dr. Nelson said. He looked up at Frank. "Want to take a look?"

Frank shook his head, glancing up with the others to look at the ambulance that was coming.

"I'll do my looking when we have her down at the morgue," he said. "How was she found? Here on the beach where she is now?"

"I found her," a narrow shouldered man in overalls spoke up eagerly. "She was in shallow water when I saw her. I took off my shoes and waded in, and dragged her out to where she is now."

"Good work, Harry," Oscar said to the man. "I'll make sure the big city papers get your name in the story as the one who found the body." He started to turn away. "Oh yes," he said, turning back. "You'll have to be at the inquest to tell about it, too. That'll be tomorrow morning at ten o'clock. Be in my office about a quarter to."

"I'd like to make a suggestion, doctor," Frank said to Dr. Nelson. "Have the ambulance men lift her onto the stretcher instead of rolling her."

The ambulance driver and his helper were already at the body. Dr. Nelson relayed the order to them. Oscar got into the car. The two doctors followed.

They rode along in silence for several minutes.

"I suppose you'll be going back to New York now that the case is cleared up?" Oscar asked suddenly. "You don't have to stay, really. I'm confident Jack will confess when we confront him with the body. I intend to do that just as soon as Dr. Nelson's through with his autopsy."

"You saw the face," Frank said, ignoring Oscar's question. "Are you sure it was the same girl, Frieda Thorne?"

"Certainly," Oscar said. He looked at Frank curiously.

Frank nodded, a frown on his face.

"What's eating you, doctor?" Oscar said, half humorously. "From your expression I'm beginning to think you doubt it was murder."

"Oh, it was murder all right," Frank said. "Or at least, I should say, she was deliberately killed. But Jack Sprout didn't do it. I'll stake my reputation on that."

"Then who did?" Oscar demanded.

"The fish," Frank said quietly. He shook his head and held up his hand as both Oscar and Dr. Nelson started to protest. "It had to be the fish. That's the only thing that makes sense, and even that doesn't make sense unless—"

"Unless what?" Oscar demanded.

"I can't answer that just yet," Frank said. "I'm going to ask you to postpone the inquest while I send for a certain young lady to help me get at the root of this mess. I'll call her long distance. She should be able to get here by morning. Her name is Helen Cooper."

"YOU'RE Oscar Freeman?"

Oscar jerked around. It was five thirty in the morning. He had volunteered to meet Helen Cooper so that Dr. Richards wouldn't have to get up at such an ungodly hour. He had watched until he thought everyone was off the train without seeing anyone answering to her description, then turned away.

"Yes," he said, sizing her up hasti-

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ly. She was a little taller than he with her high heels on. A striking brunette with sparkling blue eyes, a vivacious smile. He decided he liked her. "You must be Helen Cooper," he said, smiling.

"This is going to be exciting," Helen said. "Will I get to ride in a prowl car? You like this town, don't you. That's why you live here." She closed her eyes for a moment, then popped them open again and smiled. "It's a nice town. It has a nice spirit to it. But there's something else here. I don't mean Frank. He's here. I can feel him. But there's something else here too. Let's go to where Frank is. I'll feel safer. It's dangerous, I think. At least it's probing, though I don't believe it's sensed me yet."

She smiled again. More than a little bewildered Oscar took her arm and escorted her out to the car.

"I think I understand Dr. Richards' saying for me to bring her to him even if I had to use force," he silently decided. "She's the kind that might decide to go window shopping at six in the morning and forget what she came here for."

He was uncomfortably conscious of her presence in the seat of the car beside him as the police chauffeur drove toward the hotel.

She leaned forward suddenly and touched the driver on the shoulder.

"Please hurry," she said anxiously. She sat back as the car speeded up. Turning to Oscar she said, "I feel like I want to go swimming, but don't let me." She smiled again. "It's the *drawing*, and I'm so susceptible to it." She slid over next to him and reached for his hand. "Hold my han—" She looked down at the metal hook her fingers had touched. Her eyes widened. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said.

It was the first time anyone had ever said that in a way that made him feel good about it.

"My other hand is O.K.," he said, grinning. He reached over with it and took one of her hands. When the car stopped in front of the hotel he regretted that the trip was over so soon.

"Keep holding my hand until we get to Frank," Helen whispered. "And don't leave me for one instant."

She stayed close to him as they entered the hotel. He felt a strong urge to put his arm around her waist.

"I'd feel much better if you did," she said.

Unconsciously he put his arm around her. Then, "Huh?" he exclaimed. "Are you a mind reader?"

A smile flashed over her worried face and was gone. Suddenly she relaxed. "Frank's awake now, thank God!" she breathed almost inaudibly. "Take me straight up to his room. And don't go away. Somehow you have a good effect on me."

In the elevator she stood stiffly erect, a fixed, intent expression on her face. When they left the elevator she turned in the right direction, hurrying so fast Oscar had to almost trot to keep up with her. She seemed to know where she was going, and stopped at the right door without looking at the number. Instead of knocking she tried the knob, rattling it impatiently when it wouldn't open the door.

The key turned in the lock. The door opened. Frank stood framed in the doorway, trousers on, but barefooted and without a shirt on.

He was smiling in welcome. As his eyes came to rest on Helen his smile vanished, to be replaced by a look of concern.

"It's affected you already!" he said, almost angrily. He took her shoulder in his hand and pulled her into the room. Oscar followed, his amazement and bewilderment increasing.

BY TEN o'clock Oscar's bewilderment had increased to the point

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of numbness. And the numbness was altering to something very close to fear.

The ocean which had always been something friendly to him with its mischievous whitecaps on windy days, its lazy swells on calm days, its violently pounding waves that matched the mood of the weather on stormy days, had subtly taken on a third dimension of sinister depth. He began to sense a nameless horror lurking under its friendly surface. The same kind of formless horror that he could dimly remember imagining lurked in a darkened room when he was two or three years old.

He first caught the feeling when Helen broke away from Dr. Richards and began running as fast as her high heels could carry her toward the waterfront. He had become infected with it from the urgency in the doctor's eyes, the way he had said, "For God's sake, after her! We've got to keep her from getting to the water!"

They had caught up with her. And she had smiled at them calmly when they firmly led her back to the car. But she had changed during those few moments. When she smiled at him after that her eyes looked through him instead of at him or into him. She no longer said anything. She gave the impression her thoughts were a million miles away.

At the police station when the doctor said to put her in a room where she could be watched through peepholes, with the doors locked and heavy guard at every possible avenue of escape from the room, she hadn't seemed to even hear.

He and the doctor had watched her through peepholes. She had wandered about the room, then sat down on a hard bench, her hands folded across her lap, her eyes staring into space, a quiet little smile on her lips as though she were listening to someone. She had stayed that way. She was still in the same position when he and the doctor had come back after breakfast...

"Ten o'clock," Frank said. "This is what I want done. I want Jack Sprout brought out and placed in that room with her. He's to be told that he's being turned loose today, and all that's necessary is for him to wait in there until you can see him. Then he can go. He must believe that when he goes in there."

"But I can't do that!" Oscar said. "I'm not—"

"Do what I say," Frank said. "You'll see my reasons."

Ten minutes later they watched Jack enter the room. Through the peepholes they saw him stop just inside the door, startled, as his eyes fell on Helen. She seemed not to notice him at first.

He sat down across the room from her, studying her. Finally she looked over at him, her lips parting in a dreamy smile.

"Hello," they heard Jack say. "What are you here for?"

"Oh, I'm just waiting," Helen answered vaguely.

"I'm waiting too," Jack said. "I wish Oscar would hurry up and see me so I can get out of here. I'm anxious to take my boat out."

"You have a boat?" Helen said, looking at him with new interest. "Could I go out riding with you?"

"Uh uh," Jack said firmly. "That's why I'm in here. I took a girl out in my boat. A week later she disappeared, and they suspected me of murdering her."

Helen stood up and walked across the room. She kept her eyes locked with Jack's, dropping to her knees in front of him, resting her hands on his knees.

"Please take me out in your boat," she said. "I—I like you." She leaned toward him, a dreamy seductive smile parting her lips.

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Jack glanced about the room guiltily, then slipped his arms under hers and around her waist, drawing her close. She lifted her face. He crushed his lips against hers.

Then abruptly he was on his feet running toward the door. He pounded on it with his knuckles, shouting to be let out.

"Let him out and bring him into my office," Oscar said to the guards.

He and Frank hurried into the office. They were lounging in chairs as though they had been there for hours when Jack Sprout was admitted.

"That girl in that room!" he blurted as soon as he entered. "She's just like Frieda!"

"What do you mean?" Oscar asked.

"What I was telling you," Jack said excitedly. "Different."

"You mean—*alien?*" Frank suggested.

"Yes! That's it!" Jack said. "That's just what I mean."

"Now do you believe the story he told you?" Frank asked.

"Hell!" Oscar spat. "I believed it two hours ago."

"We're going fishing with you in your boat, Jack," Frank said. He turned to Oscar who had paled visibly. "We'll want high powered rifles with needle nose bullets."

CRAB POINT was a long finger of mainland reaching toward the boat on the port side. Already the ocean swell was taking a firm grip on the boat's motion, giving it a fore and aft rhythm that under ordinary circumstances would have been soothing. Far ahead a blue mist obscured the horizon. To the stern the town lay along the curving shore in picturesque panorama.

Oscar Freeman, the police chief, glanced sternward at Jack Sprout who was standing at the tiller, running his fingers over the spokes of the wheel lovingly. Oscar's eyes softened. He knew how much Jack loved his boat, the only thing he owned.

His gaze shifted around to the three policemen standing up in the fish hold, rifles ready, nervous tenseness visible in their every line.

He frowned at the narrow door to the cabin. Behind that locked door Helen was being too quiet. It made Oscar uneasy to have her so quiet.

He went over and bent down to look through one of the windows. Helen was sitting on a bunk, her back straight, her face relaxed, her eyes staring into space.

He went back to where the two doctors were standing.

"She's just sitting there," he growled.

Crab Point slipped to the sternward. There was no sound except the slapping of the salt water against the hull and the muted powerful sound of the motor under the deck where they stood.

"What made you believe Jack's story?" Dr. Nelson asked suddenly. "I saw so much evidence of Freudian symbolism cropping out that I was sure it was a fabrication of the mind."

"And you were right," Frank said quietly. "Most of it was a fabrication of the mind. I saw that evidence myself. There were one or two things that couldn't possibly be that, however."

He took out a cigarette and lit it, cupping his lighter in his hands.

"Did it ever occur to you," he went on, "that ocean or lake water contains enough oxygen so that if a human being could breathe it like air is breathed it would be possible to live underwater? A fish out of water can live a long time by getting its oxygen from the air, provided its gills are kept moist. In the same way people could breathe water *if they could get it into their lungs.* It's a well known fact that death by drowning

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is a sort of strangulation. Very little water gets into the lungs. The reason for that is that the phlegm in the throat and the bronchial tract gells and prevents the water from entering. Panic adds to the complications.

"If that panic could be avoided and a person were to breathe through the mouth, it might be possible to switch from air breathing to water breathing!" Frank smiled at the amazed expressions on Oscar's and Dr. Nelson's faces. "Under hypnotism it would be possible not only to prevent the panic but to convince the subject that such a thing was natural. Especially if the hypnotist were *a water breather by nature.*

"I'd never heard of it being done before, but when Jack Sprout described how Frieda climbed aboard and bent over, forcing the water from her lungs so she could breathe air again, I knew that he was describing something that actually happened. It was a thing utterly beyond his ability to imagine either consciously or subconsciously."

"I can see that now," Dr. Nelson said. "But even if I'd seen it at once I would have dismissed it. The implications are even more incredible than it would have been to admit the possibility of him being able to imagine it."

"There was something else though," Frank said. "It was his sudden feeling that something was radically different about Frieda when he took her in his arms and kissed her. So different that even though he was in the throws of physical passion and he held an undressed and very beautiful girl in his arms he suddenly thrust her away and headed back for shore to escape. Why? He hadn't felt that way the instant before! The symbolism would be obvious, if it were a symbolism. Then it could be said that in reality it had been the other way around. She had repulsed him, and after he killed her it twisted to him repulsing her. But there was a more natural explanation. If she were in a hypnotic trance at the time it would explain his reaction.

"Then there were her clothes on the beach at Crab Point. They could have been planted there, but it was more consistent with the overall picture if she had gone out there deliberately and swam out to sea. *To join the being that lurked out there, calling to her.*" He turned bleak eyes to the calm surface of the water gliding past. Oscar and Dr. Nelson followed his gaze, sensing the horror that lurked under that calm screen. "A being, perhaps out of the unexplored depths of the mid-Atlantic. A being who has come close to shore and is using its powers to call its prey to it, even from dry land, just as a certain kind of snake can hypnotize its prey, and who lurks out there even now, calling to Helen as it called to Frieda." He sighed deeply. "You see, Helen is a very gifted psychic and has been under hypnosis so many times she's extremely sensitive to it. It was Frieda Thorne's sensitiveness that made her the first victim."

"And the last, I hope," Oscar said grimly.

THE BOAT pitched suddenly to the starboard. The surface of the water boiled darkly. A shot punctuated the atmosphere.

"Stop that!" Frank said. "I told you not to fire until you could actually see something."

"Sorry, sir," the policeman who had fired said sheepishly.

Frank surveyed the unnaturally white faces of the men, the grim lines of his face relaxing slightly. "We've got to be cool," he said. "This thing, whatever it is, is big enough to rock a twenty foot boat."

"I thought Jack said it was a giant flounder," Oscar said.

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Frank shook his head. "I think it can look different to different people. In other words, the shape you will see will be what your mind paints. Not its actual shape."

He went to the cabin and stooped to look in a window. Helen had taken off her clothes. She was standing in the center of the cabin, her head cocked to one side as though she were listening to some distant voice. As he watched she went to the door.

"Be ready with your rifles," he warned.

He went to the door and unlocked it.

"Shut off your motor and drift," he said to Jack Sprout. Then to Oscar, "It may take the two of us to hold her if she tries to jump overboard."

The cabin door opened slowly. There was a universal gasp as Helen emerged slowly to stand on the deck.

Apparently unconscious of her nakedness she turned her head this way and that, sniffing the air delicately, a dreamy smile on her lips. Her eyes fell on Oscar.

"Oh, hello, darling," she said casually. "Isn't it nice weather? I think I'll go in for a swim. You don't mind do you?"

Her expression was one of utter innocence.

Oscar darted a questioning glance at Frank, who nodded.

"Of course I don't mind, Helen," Oscar said.

"You're a dear," Helen said. She stepped up to him and put her arms over his shoulders, her breasts lightly touching his shirt front.

He stood frozen, an expression of torture on his face.

Helen began to breathe deeply. Her eyes widened, glowing with inner excitement.

"Don't let her go, Oscar!" Frank said sharply.

The ship was rocking noticeably now from the motion of something under the surface. An electrical tension seemed to be building up in the atmosphere around the ship.

Helen started to step back from Oscar. Quickly he circled her waist with his arms.

"Let me go, Oscar," Helen said cajolingly. "I just want to take a short dip." Her voice sharpened angrily. "Let me go!"

The boat was rocking more violently now. It tipped suddenly to one side. Oscar fell, dragging Helen with him.

There was a flash of white as she broke free of his embrace and darted to the edge of the deck. She poised there an instant while Frank and Dr. Nelson leaped toward her. Then she was a white arc cutting into the water.

"Cover us!" Oscar shouted. He had gotten to his feet. He dived in where Helen had disappeared.

Helen had surfaced. Oscar's head appeared a few feet from hers. He was trying to get to her, his clothing hampering him.

The three police were methodically spacing their rifle fire around them.

Suddenly the motor roared into life. The boat picked up speed, making a wide circle around the two figures in the water. A pile of neatly folded net at the stern was being pulled into the water to form a circling arc of floats bobbing in the water. The boat completed its circle. Jack Sprout was in his element now, doing his work with the skill and instinct inherited from generations of fishermen.

Something appeared just under the surface. The rifle shots switched to it, but it had dropped out of sight. Jack had stopped the motor after reversing it and halting the boat. Now he began hauling in the net.

Oscar had reached Helen and was struggling with her to keep her from diving under. The net settled against them, holding them.

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The scaled back of a giant fish broke the surface just outside the net. Instantly the three rifles spat. Again, and again. Suddenly the finned back dissolved into nothing.

At the same instant Helen grew slack in Oscar's arms. Jack drew in the net until Frank and Dr. Nelson could reach down and take Helen's hands and draw her up.

JACK SPROUT went into the cabin and brought out a long poled gaff. He reached down into the widening pool of dark red and hooked it into the bulbous mass floating there. The hook took hold for a moment, then pulled through.

Helen, a robe drawn around her, stood within the encirclement of Oscar Freeman's arm, a dazed expression on her face. The others were watching the thing with a mixture of repugnance and fascination on their faces.

"It won't hook," Jack said. "Some kind of pulpy stuff that falls apart. What's that red stuff in the water? Blood?"

Something white appeared under the surface. With a grunt Jack hooked it, drawing it to the surface.

For a brief instant an almost human face was there, deeply sunken eyes of coal black glaring at them. There were black holes in the oily smooth skull shape, bullet punctures.

Then the thing parted as the gaff went through it as though it were rotten flesh. It paused just below the red surface of the water. A large bubble of air broke the surface. The whole shapeless mass slowly dropped out of sight until there was nothing but the red stain, slowly floating away.

With a hurt cry Helen turned to huddle against Oscar. He pulled her close against him, comforting her.

"What a horrible creature," Dr. Nelson whispered hoarsely.

"It's probably best that it wouldn't hold together so we could take it to shore," Frank said. "I only hope there are no more of its kind. Vampires of the deep."

"That thing looked almost human. Its face, anyway," Jack Sprout said.

"Perhaps it was, Jack," Frank said. "Yes, I rather think that once, long ago, it *was*—human."

Helen crept closer into Oscar's arms, sobbing softly.

THE END

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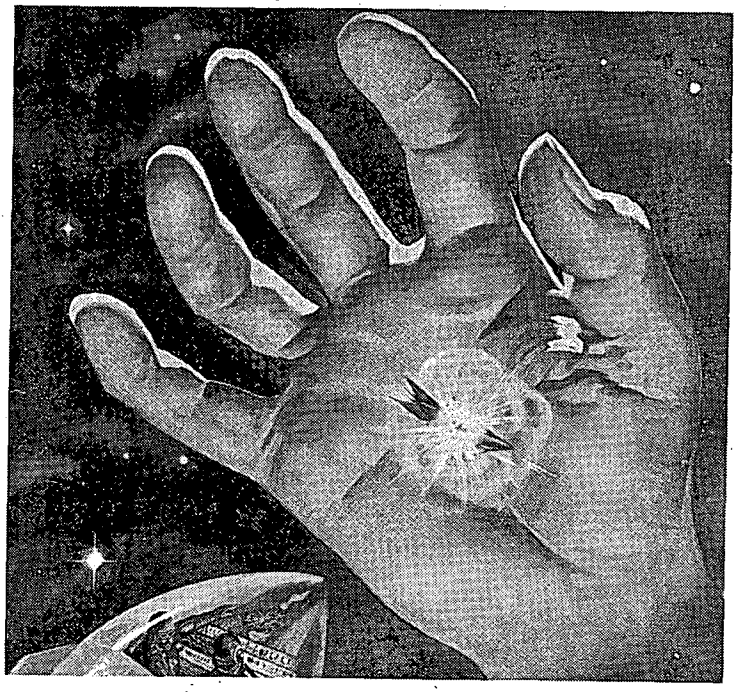

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